

Galloping Wildly In Your Care

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Galloping Wildly In Your Care

by [havitbeeac](#)

Summary

Part owner of her father's cattle ranch in Texas, Kara Danvers values her freedom and keeps things uncomplicated, avoiding serious romantic entanglements. Her work on the sprawling ranch provides ample opportunities to satisfy her love for the land and animals without needing to complicate matters with a committed partner.

Kara's life takes a turn when an elderly farmer from the nearby area starts causing problems for the Danvers family. In an effort to resolve the situation, Kara reaches out to the farmer's daughter, Lena Luthor, who has been estranged for some time. However, persuading Lena to step in and help is quite challenging.

Kara's accident forces her to stay in bed, challenging her strong independent nature. Lena faces a tough decision: save her father's property from foreclosure by accepting a job she never expected - taking care of the stubborn Kara. It's a test for Lena's nursing skills and Kara's willpower.

Notes

this is a retelling for the Supercorp universe

Art



Chapter 2



Kara Danvers stood outside the corral, arms crossed over the top rail of the fence. It was spring, and the Texas sun was already warm. She took off her cowboy hat and ran her fingers through her hair, then put it back on her head, pulling the front down to shield her eyes. Tiny streaks marked her frown and lines of smile through the layer of dust that covered her face. Kara had a pure and classic beauty in her slim, muscular body. Her blue eyes and blonde hair framed a golden tan face. Her leather chaps were polished with a well-worn shine and splattered with mud, blood, and sweat. Her Appaloosa stallion, Coal, was tied to the fence beside her, chewing on a bit of hay. The cinch had been loosened, a reward for her hard morning's work.

Jeremiah Danvers, Kara's father, stood beside her, also dressed in jeans, chaps, a western shirt, boots, and a Stetson hat. He was a tall man, square-jawed, and with a keen eye for action within the corral. It was a rodeo, and the air was thick with dust and the smell of manure. The vast herd waiting to be processed mooed like a constant concert.

"Fine-looking bunch, if I do say so, Kara," Jeremiah said, adjusting his hat at the back of his head. His face was dirty and weathered, the appearance of a Texan tending to his cattle. Even his thick mustache was covered in dust.

"T-bone has sired some good young ones. Glad I kept him," Kara replied, taking a sip from a water bottle, then handing it to her father. He took a sip and handed it back.

Inside the corral, the calves were roped, branded, vaccinated, and castrated. The work was dirty, smelly, and gross at times, but Kara loved it. This was what a Texas rancher did to produce top-quality restaurant-grade beef, and the registered Black Angus raised at the Cottonwood Ranch were some of the finest Texas had to offer.

Jeremiah inherited the ranch from his father, Drew Danvers, who inherited it from his father, Bull Danvers. Kara knew her great-grandfather must have had a different name than Bull, but it was a constant source of family speculation about what it was. As he signed his name with a scribble and an elaborate 'D', not even the ranch deed helped resolve the conjectures. Any important documents that might hold the secret of Bull's true identity were lost when a prairie fire swept across the pasture in 1934, consuming 10,000 acres of grazing land and the family house. Any rancher would explain that good grazing during the Dust Bowl era was far more valuable than the house. Bull, his wife Sabrina, and their two children were forced to live in a one-room grass hut until the house could be rebuilt – a new two-story house considered one of the most modern farmhouses of its time in South Texas. Despite the Depression, or perhaps because of it, Bull built his wife the house of her dreams, employing unemployed local craftsmen and feeding them top-quality meat as they worked.

The house had two full bathrooms, an efficient large kitchen with a lavatory, fireplaces for charm and beauty as well as function, closets (a luxury at the time), a large covered back porch, and an upstairs sleeping screened-in porch that allowed the cool breeze to flow on hot summer nights. Air conditioning wasn't added until Jeremiah took over the house when his father died at forty-eight. The farmhouse was built with traditional wood framing and white plank siding. Kara thought it looked like a sugar cube with windows, but she loved the old house so much that she insisted on moving into it after her parents built their new five-hundred-square-meter house at the far end of the ranch with a dramatic view of Rio Mesa. Kara's house was a twenty-minute drive from her parents' house, a feature she cherished as an independent thirty-year-old woman.

As she entered high school, Kara realized she found cowgirls more attractive than cowboys. It was an advantage for her to be a farmer's daughter, as jeans, boots, and horses were part of everyday life. She didn't need to hide anything. She couldn't, anyway.

Kara had always been a strong-willed woman, not shying away from getting her hands dirty in the daily work of the ranch. She worked for her father, and it was no secret that he expected her to take over the family business someday, something she was more than capable of. As an only child, Cottonwood Ranch would one day be hers.

"I don't agree with the count," a woman shouted, trotting on her foal to the fence.

Lexie Grey was a ranch hand. She was a bit over thirty-six years old but refused to confess how much. She could ride a horse, rope a calf, lift a bale of hay, and pull a calf, if not better than any man around. But Kara could too, for that matter. Lexie had been hired over fifteen years ago to help with the newborn calves, her specialty, but soon she was doing every job the other ranch hands were asked to do. Some joked that Lexie had been a gunslinging poker player in a previous life. She had short red hair that was already showing a few gray strands and a tan face that never knew a drop of makeup. Her eyes were dark and piercing, often cutting through any cowboy who thought he could relax in her presence. She could flick a fly off a fence post with a whip at ten paces and sew up the torn vulva of a heifer without flinching. She had the respect of every person on the ranch and earned it through years of hard work. It was assumed that Lexie was a lesbian. She never dated, at least not that anyone saw. On her days off, she drove her old truck to Del Rio, a small town on the Texas border with Mexico. When she returned, she sported a shy smile for a few days, a smile the ranch hands presumed was due to the sweet Texas air around Del Rio. Lexie had more seniority than the other ranch hands, all except J'onnn.

J'onnn Jones was a foreigner from some part of France who came to Texas as a child with his parents. He had gray and thick hair, a sparse mustache, a tall scar above his right eye from a kick of a wild bull, and had been wearing the same brown cowboy hat for ten years. He had been with the Danvers since he was a rowdy fifteen-year-old and rough talker. He was now the head Wrangler

and oversaw the sperm bank of the Cottonwood Ranch. The registered Black Angus bulls of the Danvers contributed some of the most sought-after sperm in the state. Selling sperm from prize-winning bulls was a commercial harvest that generated considerable profit, above and beyond the vast herds that were trucked to the market. J'onn's son and grandsons also worked for the Danvers, something J'onn was very proud of, but something he quickly criticized if they weren't up to par.

"How many are left?" Jeremiah asked, swatting away an annoying fly.

"I counted the ones in the pens, and there's still about eighty head missing. Did you take any from this pasture?" Lexie asked, her horse tugging against the reins to get back to work.

"No. And you, Kara?" Jeremiah asked, fishing a piece of chewing tobacco from his vest pocket. He bit off a corner and began to chew it.

"No. Are you sure the pasture's been cleared? They usually huddle against that row of trees near the creek and are hard to flush out."

"I think so. I'll take a look after lunch."

"Kara!" one of the cowboys shouted, pointing at a calf that had slipped through the partially open gate and was now happily bounding across the open field. "That one hasn't been done yet."

"I'll get him," Kara said, tightening the cinch on Coal's saddle and loosening the reins. "Time to work, Coal," she said as she grabbed the saddle with both hands and vaulted onto it, catching the heel of her boot in the stirrup.

"Just send Coal after that darn thing, Kara," Lexie yelled with a hearty laugh. "He does all the work anyway."

Kara swung her leg over as she guided the stallion in a circle. She reached her hand over the fence and snagged Lexie's hat, then directed Coal towards the fleeing calf.

"Sorry 'bout that," Kara yelled over her shoulder, then let out a triumphant laugh.

Kara urged Coal into a gallop as she leaned forward, pulling her hat down tight. She grabbed the rope around the saddle and formed a loop, spinning it over her head. When she was within range, she released the loop, catching the calf around the neck. She wrapped the rope around the horn of the saddle, flipping the calf with a snap.

"Lucky shot," Lexie hollered, then reached out and grabbed the hat without dismounting.

"Come on, young'un," Kara said, leading the calf back to the corral as it bucked and pulled against the rope. "You ain't ready to be out on your own yet."

Lexie maneuvered her horse toward the gate and swung it open for Kara, then closed it with a kick of her foot, locking the latch. One of the ranch hands released the rope from around the calf's neck and pulled it to the side. Three cowboys immediately descended on the calf, injecting it with a stainless steel syringe, castrating the young bull, and branding it with a mark that looked like a lollipop with a crooked stick. That had been the Cottonwood Ranch brand since Bull Danvers bought his first heifer. Jeremiah still branded his cattle the old-fashioned way. Kara had tried to persuade him to embrace the modern age of ranching and inject the cattle with a microchip that would allow for more precise record-keeping of everything from age to feed cost. But Jeremiah wasn't ready for that change yet.

Kara guided Coal back to the fence where Jeremiah and Lexie were watching.

"I'll check the pasture. Got a feeling I know what happened to those eighty head," Kara stated, then narrowed her eyes to the north.

Jeremiah grunted, spitting tobacco juice at a fly that had landed on the fence.

"Hope Lion ain't rustling our cattle again. Ain't got time for him."

"Unless aliens came down and abducted them, where else you think eighty head went?" Kara asked, watching the rebellious calf struggle to its feet after its ordeal. It looked crazed but none the worse for wear.

"Old coot," Lexie muttered, spitting out a mouthful of dust.

"I'll take a look," Kara said with resignation.

"Call and let me know what you find," Jeremiah said, checking to make sure his cell phone was in his vest pocket.

Kara nodded, grabbing one of the canteens hanging on the fence post. She headed north at a comfortable pace, one Coal could maintain all day. She had raised the big stallion since he was a stubborn colt, naming him for the black spots on his rump that reminded her of chunks of coal. He was considered too wild to make a good ranch horse, but Kara's patience had paid off; his temperament was no match for her stubborn determination to tame him.

The Cottonwood Ranch was divided into several sections to keep the vast herd in manageable numbers. It was more efficient to have pens, chutes, and corrals in each section of the pasture to process the calves and inoculate the adults. The northern pasture was the farthest from Jeremiah's farmhouse but the closest to Kara's. A corner of the Danvers property touched Lion Luthor's ranch, The Little Diamond. It was a small spread with a house, barn, fence, corrals, and outbuildings in need of repair. Lion no longer raised cattle and had sold a portion of his ranch several years ago, a piece of land that jutted into the Danvers property at the extreme corner of the north pasture. It was only sixty acres, but Jeremiah and Kara were happy to buy it as it improved their property, making it easier to fence and control the cattle. But Lion had trouble remembering the sale, even when the sheriff repeatedly knocked on his door with a copy of the deed transfer and a warning to leave the Danvers' fence alone.

Kara made good time. She knew all the shortcuts to the far reaches of the ranch. When she was convinced there were no lost cows, she lined up with the fence line and the spot she thought was most likely where Lion would have made an opening. She crossed the creek and, not surprisingly, found that all four strands of barbed wire had been cut. A section nearly thirty yards long was open, the wires in tatters and strewn across the pasture. She reached for her phone and dialed her father's number.

"Da fence done fell," she reported, gritting her teeth as she examined the wire ends.

"Yeah, and I bet I know who done it," he growled.

"Headin' to his place."

"Don't get too close, Kara. Remember last time. Don't want him takin' a shot at you. He's crazy as a loon."

"He couldn't hit a barn with a cannon," Kara scoffed.

"Yeah, I know, but don't take chances, you hear me?"

She hung up and pocketed the phone. It was only a few miles to Lion's house, and she couldn't wait. They'd been making excuses for his eccentricities for too long. She urged Coal into a lope, hoping her anger would subside before she reached Lion's corral, where she strongly suspected Cottonwood Angus was being held captive. When she spotted his house, she slowed Coal to a walk. A man stood at the corral gate, a rope in his hand. The corral was full of cows, Black Angus cows, all with a lollipop brand on their rumps. Kara pulled Coal to a halt and wiped sweat from her forehead as she surveyed the scene.

"Well, well. What do we have here?" She urged Coal forward. As she neared, the man shielded his eyes from the sun and peered at the rider.

"What you want?" he snarled. "This here's private property. You best get off my land."

Lion Luthor was seventy-four and wiry. He had a perpetual three-day beard and wore suspenders and a belt to hold up his worn jeans. He glared at Kara through small, round eyes.

"Fine lookin' bunch of cows you got there," Kara said, trying not to sound suspicious.

"Yeah. I raised 'em all by myself. They're Texas longhorns," he said proudly.

"Thought they were Black Angus," Kara said, then wished she hadn't.

"They're longhorns. That's all we raise here," Lion argued.

Kara noticed Lion had his boots on the wrong feet. She caught a whiff of his body odor as Coal came closer, and it took her breath away. She coughed and gave a tug on the reins, making the stallion step back a few paces. It was obvious Lion had no idea who she was, and identifying herself might do more harm than good.

"What brand is that, Lion?" She pointed at the cows in the corral.

"They ain't got a brand yet, ain't had time. Lots to do on a spread like this. Fence always fallin' somewhere, and I can't afford to hire hands."

Kara nodded, not wanting to rile up Lion's anger or suspicion more than necessary. Lion hadn't had anyone working for him in years, and the last cow he'd taken to market was eight years ago, but arguing over those details wouldn't serve any purpose. Like all the other times, he'd been the one to cut the fence and lure the Danvers cattle into his pens. And like all the other times, he seemed oblivious to reality. Kara certainly didn't want to be the one to force the issue. It wouldn't do any good to drive the cattle back through the fence; it would take several hours to fix what he'd destroyed.

"You wouldn't happen to know who cut part of our fence, would you, Lion?" she asked cautiously.

"Naw," he replied with a scowl. "Ain't seen nobody cuttin' no dang fence. Bet it was rustlers," he added, as if sharing a secret.

"No doubt," Kara said, casually circling outside the corral to see if the cows were alright. She noticed they had several hay bales and a galvanized water trough, so at least she didn't have to worry about them starving. Some of the cows hadn't calved yet, but she recognized them as experienced mothers, so she didn't press Lion on where they came from. That was a matter for the sheriff, especially since Kara spotted an old double-barreled shotgun leaning against the corral gate, just out of his reach. He might be an old coot, but she didn't want to test his aim.

"Got work to do," he grumbled, locking the gate and propping a board against the latch as if it were

a lock. He grabbed his shotgun and walked to the house, muttering to himself as if he'd forgotten Kara was there. She waited until Lion went inside and closed the door before dialing her father's number on her cell phone.

"He's got 'bout eighty head of our herd in his corral. Looks like 'bout twenty calves too."

Jeremiah unleashed a string of profanities, yelling loud enough for everyone working in the corral to hear. "You sure it's our brand?"

"Who else got our circle stick brand?" Kara retorted as she rode Coal home.

Kara suddenly heard a gunshot, then another, from the direction of the house. She looked back and saw two puffs of smoke coming from the shotgun in Lion's hands.

"What you doin' there?" Lion hollered as he crossed the yard and shook his fist in Kara's direction. "You git off my land. You trespassin'." He stood in the clearing between the house and the corral gate, then shouldered the shotgun and aimed it at her.

"Old coot," she yelled back at him. She knew he'd fired off the old rusty gun and hadn't reloaded, but she didn't want to take chances. "Put that thing away 'fore you hurt yourself."

"Kara!" Jeremiah was shouting on the phone. "Kara? What's goin' on?"

"Nothin'. Lion's just actin' like John Wayne." She spurred Coal into a half-gallop and moved out of Lion's range.

"I'm callin' the sheriff. I'm done messin' with that old Luthor. Where'd he cut the fence?"

"Just west of Rattlesnake Lake. 'Bout thirty-yard section."

"He's cost me money and trouble one too many times," Jeremiah declared, spitting in anger.

Kara chose not to admit that Lion had shot at her again. He hadn't hit anything, but Jeremiah didn't need more fuel for his anger. Lion was just an old man with no family to speak of and was growing more senile with each passing year. He had once been a good, decent farmer, but that was before his grip on reality started to slip. This wasn't the first time Kara had to rescue the Danvers Angus from Lion's corral, and she knew that unless something was done to stop him, it wouldn't be the last time.

The workday was winding down, and ranch hands were loading up their gear as Kara returned. A line of pickups followed the dirt trail back to the county road and their homes. A hot meal, a shower, a good night's sleep, and they'd be back tomorrow to finish working the cattle in this grazing area. Kara loaded Coal onto the trailer and hung a bucket of feed for him. She was exhausted and hungry. All she could think about was soaking in a hot bath and forgetting about the aggravation Lion had caused.

"I called the sheriff," Jeremiah announced as he pulled up beside his truck. "Told 'em I want Lion Luthor locked up for cattle rustlin'." Jeremiah spat his wad of chew into the dust and shifted the manual transmission into first gear.

"He's not really a rustler, you know," Kara said, climbing into her own truck's cabin. She didn't like the extra work Lion had caused, but she wasn't sure if it was worth having him arrested.

"Devil he ain't."

"The decision's yours, Dad, but he doesn't know what he's doing. He never sells 'em."

"Comin' over for supper tonight?" he asked, ignoring the Lion and cattle matter.

"I reckon not. I'm beat. I'll grab something at home and see you out here tomorrow. Tell Mom I'll eat with you when we're workin' the east and south sections."

Jeremiah nodded and then pulled away.

"Heard Lion's got them missing cows," Lexie said, walking up to Kara's truck. She'd taken off her chaps and slung them over her shoulder. Sweat marks stained her jeans at the hips.

"Yeah, cows and calves," Kara replied.

"Your dad's callin' the sheriff this time. He's mad enough to chew nails."

"We gotta stop Lion from cuttin' the fence. Get a crew out first thing in the mornin' to fix it. Tell 'em it's 'bout thirty yards, all four wires. Posts look good. Tell 'em to put in a working section, but not to make a scene. I wanna be able to drive them cows back soon as the sheriff gets there. And tell 'em nobody goes onto Little Diamond's property till the sheriff arrives. That old coot might shoot someone."

"He shot at you again?" Lexie asked, giving Kara a hard look.

"Yeah," Kara said calmly. "But I don't want nobody knowin'."

"Kara, the sheriff oughta know about this. You can't let him be out there shootin' at you. It ain't no Tombstone, you know."

"He missed."

"Too bad your daughter ain't doin' nothin' 'bout him."

"What daughter? He ain't got no kids."

"Well, not of his own, by birth, but he and his wife adopted one. Least that's what I heard." Lexie pushed her hat back from her head.

"When? I ain't seen nobody else around that place in years."

"Lion had a nephew or someone workin' a ranch across from Harland a good many years back. I remember he said Lion and his wife couldn't have kids. 'Bout twenty-five or thirty years ago, there was a bad car accident that killed a young couple and left their baby daughter in state custody, so Mrs. Luthor asked the court for custody. Within a year they'd adopted her. Both of 'em was in their fifties by then."

"I don't recall nobody that age livin' there. She'd have had to go to Harland schools."

"Rumor has it they split up before she was school age. Mrs. Luthor took the girl and ran. They said Lion ain't been the same since," Lexie added.

"In that case, she probably don't know nothin' 'bout him now."

"Figure she's livin' in San Antonio. Overheard court workers talkin' 'bout tryin' to get in touch with her."

"What's her name? She's likely married and got a few kids by now."

"Let's see," Lexie said, scratching her head and looking off into space. "Think I heard somethin' like Lucy, Lainey, or Laurel. Somethin' with an L. And I don't think she's married. They used the Luthor name when they were talkin' 'bout her."

"Might solve our problems if she'd come talk to her dad and get him to leave our fence and cattle be," Kara suggested.

"Maybe you oughta mention it to the sheriff."

"Maybe," Kara answered, her mind already racing about contacting the woman herself, hoping to persuade her to do the daughter thing and talk to her father. The sheriff department's efforts had done little to stop Lion from cutting their fences.

"I need a bath," Lexie said, thumping her hat against her jeans-clad leg. "See you tomorrow."

"Yep, tomorrow," Kara said, giving a nod and stepping away as the sun gave a hint of orange on the horizon.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

<https://i.postimg.cc/VLcmtThn/9aca2158035511748d1e32db8daac07f-ins.jpg>

Kara was the first to arrive at the corral just before dawn. It was a cool morning, with a clear and crisp sky and the sweet scent of sagebrush. This was her favorite time of day, before sweat and noise erased the innocence of the prairie. She saddled Coal and tied him by the horse trailer as she cinched her pants. When she finished her thermos of coffee and scrambled eggs wrapped in a tortilla, the trucks began to roll in. J'onn immediately shouted orders to start the morning's work.

All the ranch hands had a good working relationship with Jeremiah and Kara. The Danvers were fair and kind employers, willing to pay a decent wage for a decent day's work. They didn't hesitate to jump in and do the work themselves. Kara always knew she couldn't be just a supervisor. She wanted to feel the rope in her hand and the horse between her thighs. It was in her blood. It was what woke her in the morning and carried her through the long days. Even after a sunup-to-sundown workday, her body might be exhausted, but her soul still craved more. Nothing put a smile on her face like the Texas wind in her hair and the open spaces ahead. She had honed her ranching skills from a young age, and her dedication to the ranch had grown as she matured. But it had come at a high cost. With long days and year-round responsibilities, Kara had little time for anything else. Living on a ranch meant socializing was limited to trading jokes and grabbing a beer from the ice chest with the hired help. But like Lexie, Kara found her private life on occasional trips to Austin or San Antonio. She'd exhausted all the lesbian possibilities in Harland, a small cattle town in South Texas. Lexie and Kara never discussed what they had in common, though both knew the other was gay. Both wanted a gentle touch and a no-strings-attached type of woman. And that was only found behind the smoky haze of bars in distant cities.

Jeremiah backed his horse out of the trailer. It was already saddled and raring to go.

"You call the sheriff?" Kara asked, swinging a leg over Coal's broad back. "Don't wanna head back to Lion's place to claim the cows 'til he gets there."

"You bet. He'll be there by nine." Jeremiah swung onto his horse and checked his watch. "Said he'd call once he's on site."

"Heard Lion's got a daughter in San Antonio. Figured maybe she oughta be contacted. If she's his only close kin, she might have to handle things for him."

"Doubt she wants anything to do with him. She's probably just as crazy as he is." Jeremiah put on his hat and turned his horse toward the corral, Kara following behind. "However, if she's his closest kin, maybe someone should talk to her. If Lion's as crazy as I think he is, she might need to be brought in anyway."

"Headin' to San Antonio tomorrow to stock up. Figured I might chat with this woman and see why she ain't stepping in and doing somethin'," Kara said.

"We need her help. No more trouble from the Luthors. So take it easy with her, Kara. Be nice."

"I'm always nice," she said, pulling her hat low over her forehead and trotting toward the day's work.

"Don't curse her out, for heaven's sake," he shouted.

Kara, Jeremiah, Lexie, and the rest of the wranglers spent the day tending to the calves to be processed, deworming and inoculating the adults, and separating the ones that hadn't calved yet. Lunch was coolers of meat, cheese, fruit, pies, sodas, and gallons of water. Jeremiah even allowed a beer at lunch, as long as it didn't interfere with anyone's ability to work. By sunset, the north pasture had been finished, and the cattle had been turned out to graze. According to the sheriff, Lion Luthor had been taken into custody, cursing and complaining the whole way into town. The Cottonwood crews had fixed the fence and reclaimed the rustled cattle. As far as Jeremiah was concerned, it was done. He didn't care what happened to Lion as long as he didn't have to keep fixing his vandalism. Lion was out of his mind. Jeremiah had forgiven his acts one last time.

Kara spoke with the sheriff to see if he knew anything about Lion's daughter. With limited information, she found an address in San Antonio for an LK Luthor. It wasn't much to go on, and the address was a few years old, but it was worth a shot. Kara didn't want to call her and risk her just hanging up. The only way she planned to meet this woman was face to face. She knew Lion wouldn't stay in jail for more than a few weeks, or maybe a couple months at most. The judge wasn't going to throw the book at this old man. It wasn't like he was an axe murderer or something. At the very least, he'd be out and back to cutting Cottonwood's fence come fall. If bail was granted and he could pay it, he might even be out in a matter of days.

Kara woke up early and headed east on Highway 90 for the two-hour trip to San Antonio. She had a list of stops to make, including the feed store, the ranch equipment dealer, and some errands while she was in town. But she didn't mind. She planned to spend the night anyway, had her weekend planned down to the last detail, in fact. She'd finish her tasks, have dinner at Globe's Chicken Hut, then check into the motel before hitting Rainbow Desert nightclub. Tomorrow she'd meet LK Luthor, but tonight was hers.

Once a month, Kara drove to San Antonio to buy supplies, and once a month she spent the night at the Capri Motel, just down the street from the Rainbow Desert. The Capri wasn't the Taj Mahal, but it didn't need to be. It was clean and close enough to walk to the club. It was also close enough to hurry back from if she found a cute reason.

Kara had been going to the Rainbow Desert since it opened six years ago. It was the kind of place that stirred up the country riffraff, with more broken chairs and tobacco spit than Dodge City in the 19th century. When it was bought out of bankruptcy by a lesbian couple and converted into a gay club, there was a certain smug satisfaction that local gays found in adding a rainbow flavor to what was once a homophobic hellhole of a scene. Now it was a thriving business, being one of the only gay establishments on the west side of town. The neighborhood didn't mind. There were fewer fights, quieter patrons, and a cleaner parking lot.

Kara arrived at the bar just after eight. She had showered and put on clean jeans and a fresh shirt before walking the four blocks from the Capri. Lucy, one of the owners, was working the bar. She waved, tipping her white cowboy hat to Kara. Kara tipped the brim of her Stetson, the one she wore when she wanted to dress up. She hardly used it, but the bar's flavor screamed at her to follow her roots of the Wild West. It framed her face and showcased her sapphire eyes. Her blonde hair cascaded down her back, a few strands teasingly peeking from beneath the brim. Kara had a firm ass, a sculpted torso, and long legs—the kind made for snug jeans—and highly polished cowboy boots. Her crocodile leather boots had silver tips that matched her silver belt buckle. She stood by the bar, letting her eyes adjust to the dim light.

"Kara," a woman called from the darkness. "Over here, Kara."

She squinted across the room and moved toward the voice as another song started playing. A group of women waved to her from the corner table, the one with the best view of the front door, the dance floor, and the bar. Kara made her way through the tables, giving an open smile to the four women. Several of them jumped up for hugs and kisses on Kara. They weren't her friends, but from being at the bar so long and always seeing one another, they lived in a camaraderie whenever they crossed paths.

"Hey, lookin' good, Kara," Nancy said, giving her an up-and-down look.

Nancy was a short Hispanic woman with a thick head of black hair, full lips, and a pleasant figure. Nancy was a third-grade teacher and an old-school lipstick lesbian. She wanted a relationship that lasted years and improved with time like a fine wine. Her last relationship had lasted six months. After spending hundreds of dollars on a woman who talked to birds in the trees, she discovered the woman had multiple girlfriends, most of them concurrently. Nancy had been part of Kara's monthly group from the start. Her crush on Kara had lasted over a year and only ended after they consummated their curiosity and decided they'd be better friends than lovers.

"Hey, Nancy." Kara smiled and squeezed her shoulder as she took a seat at the corner booth. "How's everyone?"

"We're all good. Well, except Sonny," Nancy said, nudging the woman beside her.

"Don't start with me, Nancy," Sonny snapped, her eyes scanning the room.

Sonny was over thirty but had a cute round face with baby-blue eyes, short blonde hair, and a charming look that melted women's hearts. She and Kara often sparred over the right to hit on some new bar patron. But it was all in good fun. It became a game for the women at the corner table to watch Sonny stalk her prey, like watching a hawk circle over the prairie.

"Hey there, Sonny," Kara said, placing her order with the waitress.

"Nothin'," she grumbled, eyeing a woman at the far end of the bar.

"Having trouble with the ladies?" Kara asked with a glint in her eyes.

"No. No trouble." Sonny's blue eyes narrowed and she shot an accusatory look at the woman in tight black jeans.

"Sonny got ditched by the busty redhead," AJ chimed in from the other side of the table.

AJ was a product of the '70s. Her parents were Woodstock hippies, and she was their beloved offspring. She was a free spirit and wore bell-bottom jeans and peasant tops to prove it. Her brown hair fell to her waist and was adorned with beads and funky jewelry, much of it thrifted and worn to make a statement against societal waste.

"I wasn't ditched," Sonny declared. "Ditched is what happened to Amber."

"I want you to know I wasn't ditched, Sonny," Amber quipped, giving her best Valley girl impression. "I was ceremoniously lowered from the pinnacle of the love pedestal." She shot a sidelong glance and batted her eyelashes, then let out a mischievous laugh.

Amber was the youngest of the group, at twenty-five. She had round hips, small breasts, a lively laugh, and a big heart. An auditor at a big downtown bank, she used to arrive at the Rainbow

Desert straight from work, wearing slacks and a blouse. She had dimples on her chubby cheeks and teary eyes that flowed like water whenever someone was being thrown to the lions. Her passion for Kara was hard to hide, but she had learned to live with it, releasing small sighs and moans when Kara accidentally brushed against her or, let's be honest, danced with her.

"Oh, geez, Amber," Kara offered with a soft sigh. "I'm sorry to hear that. Who was it? That delivery driver?"

"Nope. That was Denise. She got toasted weeks ago. This was Nicole, the unemployed one." Amber laughed. "And don't apologize. I liked that toast. Nicole dumped me 'cause I wouldn't let her take my car to Chicago over spring break."

"Sorry anyway, kiddo," Kara offered.

"Yeah, well, you know." Amber shrugged and sighed. "But the sex was good."

"You let a good one slip away?" Sonny teased. "What's her name? What's her number?" She grinned.

"You got your own troubles, Sonny. You didn't need Nicole," Amber argued.

"Hey, the way it's going, maybe I should go out with you," Sonny joked.

When she came back from the bathroom, Amber was waiting and leaped up to greet her. The dance floor was crowded with women doing a line dance.

"Dance with me, Kara. Please," she whined, grabbing her by the arm.

"Sonny loves dancing to these things," Kara said, trying to get back to her seat.

"No, I don't know," Sonny replied. "I don't do line dances. You can't touch your partner. Why not just stomp on the ground alone?"

"Come on, Kara." Amber was pulling her onto the dance floor. "I love this song."

"Fine," Kara grumbled and allowed Amber to drag her onto the parquet floor. Within a few beats of the music, Amber and Kara joined in, twirling and tapping their feet. Amber was surprisingly light on her feet for a bigger woman. Kara hooked her thumbs in her belt and moved with the music, graceful and agile. When the song ended, Amber locked her arm with Kara's and led her back to the table, savoring every moment of their time together.

"Thanks, Kara." Amber gave her a cheek kiss and a hug for her effort.

"You should've danced with us," Amber said toward Nancy. "I love line dancing."

"I much prefer partner activities," Nancy said sarcastically.

Kara watched a woman entering the bar.

"Oh, mercy," Kara said in an exaggerated accent, watching her cross the room.

"I don't know what kind of woman that is," Sonny said with a slow moan, also noticing the woman with long dark hair and jeans hugging her body in all the right places. "But I hope she's my kind."

A tall woman followed the brunette through the front door and escorted her to a table where two other women were already drinking. The brunette smiled, greeted the other women, and sat down, facing Kara's table. The tables were on opposite sides of the dance floor and meant Kara and Sonny had to sway and crane to see between the dancers.

"I think tonight's competition just got underway," Nancy laughed, watching Sonny and Kara ogle the woman.

"Both of you can't afford that." Amber said, giving the woman's body a critical look. "That's pure chocolate. You two need to stick to penny candy."

"No kidding," Nancy said, looking the brunette up and down too. "Why doesn't my butt look that good in jeans?"

"I'm gonna ask her to dance," Sonny announced, finishing her beer and pushing her chair back.

"She's with someone," Nancy declared, grabbing Sonny's arm. "She's not gonna dance with you."

"She won't if I don't ask her," Sonny stood up and looked at Kara. "He who hesitates is—"

"Go for it," Kara interjected, being a good sport about it.

The rest of the women at the table watched as Sonny crossed the room and introduced herself to the brunette, flashing her best smile and lightly touching the woman's shoulder. To everyone's surprise, the woman smiled and stood up. The tall woman she came in with was engrossed in conversation with the ladies at the table, seemingly unconcerned. Sonny took the brunette's hand and led her onto the dance floor for a Texas two-step. Kara was immediately sizing the woman up as Sonny guided them around the floor. Slightly shorter than Kara. Good dancer. Nice butt. Beautiful breasts. Radiant smile. Alabaster skin. Yeah. Sonny had hit the jackpot at the end of the rainbow. Kara was sure of it.

When the dance ended, the woman smiled in gratitude and headed for the ladies' room. Sonny returned to the table with a triumphant air, Amber and Nancy booing her as she sat down with a smile too big to ignore.

"What's her name?" AJ asked.

"What did she say?" Amber added eagerly.

"Is she with that other woman?" Nancy asked. They all leaned in, eager for Sonny's report.

"I just asked her to dance. I didn't ask for her life story. I said 'wanna dance?' She said yes. You gotta take these things slow." Sonny leaned back and looked where the woman had gone.

"Slow? Since when do you do anything slow? You mean she thanked you and walked away," Kara offered with an ironic smile.

"She had to use the restroom. What was I supposed to do? Go with her?"

"You didn't get her name?" AJ asked.

"I don't remember," Sonny argued, happy with her win even if the table ladies weren't.

"Are you gonna ask her for another dance?" Kara asked, watching the brunette exit the bathroom and head to the table. The woman she had come in with paid her little mind, conversation at the

table seemingly more important than courtesy. The brunette sat down and looked around, smiling and sipping a strawberry margarita as the other three women chatted. Kara assumed she wasn't a beer person. The woman absently tossed her shoulder-length hair, exposing her devastatingly flexible neck, something that sent a shiver down Kara's spine. Sonny and Nancy were engrossed in conversation too much to notice the woman looking utterly and completely bored. But Kara did. She couldn't take her eyes off the brunette since she sat down and, as fate would have it, she and Kara finally made eye contact. Kara quickly flashed a smile upon catching the woman looking at her. It was a spontaneous smile, and Kara regretted not making it more genuine. The woman looked away. Kara sat there, looking in her direction, hoping she'd offer another look, even if for a brief moment. The woman's eyes found their way back to Kara. They were green from the distance, or at least Kara assumed they were from her vantage point across the room. They were full of emotion and tenderness. Kara could tell. She could feel it. Even from across the room, separated by a crowded dance floor, Kara could feel that this was the epitome of a goddess she had ever seen. Kara allowed a slower, more cautious smile to form on her lips as they continued to study each other.

"Are you gonna ask her to dance?" AJ asked, nudging Kara's arm.

"What?" Kara didn't hear a word of what she said.

"Are you gonna ask her to dance? You've been staring at her long enough."

"Nah, I don't think so," Kara replied, content to watch the brunette from afar.

Before anyone had a chance to say anything, Sonny was up and on her way to ask the woman for another dance. Kara kicked herself. But this time, the brunette smiled politely and declined Sonny's invitation. It was clear that Sonny was crushed.

"Wow, shot down," AJ said, rubbing Sonny's arm as she sat back down. "What'd she say?"

"What do you think she said? She said no." Sonny poured herself a full glass of beer and drank half.

The woman agreed to dance with one of the women at her table and promptly got lost in the crowd on the dance floor. Kara couldn't see her anymore. For a fleeting moment, she thought about asking Nancy or Amber to dance just so she could get closer to the woman. Instead, she flagged down the waitress. Maybe after another beer, she'd muster up the courage to ask the brunette to dance, a courage she normally didn't have trouble finding.

"I need a beer," Kara said, heading to the bar to order one herself. She leaned against the bar, waiting her turn and watching the dancers. She scanned the top of the crowd for raven hair. At every momentary glimpse, she stretched and craned her neck to see if it was her brunette, the green-eyed, sexy-smiling one.

"Excuse me," someone said behind her.

Kara hadn't realized she was blocking the bar's path.

"Are you gonna order or just stand there in the way?" the voice asked impatiently.

"What?" Kara turned to look at the woman behind her, a little confused.

"Do you mind moving? You're in the way," the woman said with annoyance.

"Take a hike," Kara said, standing on her toes to see over the growing mass of dancers.

"I don't care what you're doing. You could move," the woman behind her was getting angrier by the second. She gave Kara a gentle shove to get her to step aside.

Kara stood her ground, pushing an elbow back. She had lost sight of the brunette and was desperate to find her again.

"Are you stupid or what? Can't you understand simple English? I said move around," Kara shouted over the music. She wasn't usually this rude. But her normally placid manner was taking a back seat to her need to find the breathtaking smile woman. She turned to face the annoyance. She choked and stumbled on the leg of a bar stool as she came face to face with the brunette, her green eyes blazing venom at her.

"You're the rudest person I've ever met," she hissed, gritting her teeth at Kara.

Kara felt the blood drain instantly from her face, and her dinner took a nosedive in her stomach. Her knees grew weak, unsure if they would hold her up. No matter how hard she tried, no words would come. She just stared at the woman, feeling more foolish than she ever could remember.

"Well," the woman said, resting her hand on her hip.

"Ar- are you gonna... dance?" Kara stammered, her mouth taking control of her brain.

"You've got to be kidding me," the woman scowled. "Are you going to move or just stand there like you own the place? And, by the way, I know you're not the owner because no businessperson would dare be so rude and offensive."

"I'm not rude," Kara heard herself say, but she wanted to say she was sorry for being rude. Nothing was coming out of her mouth the way she meant. This woman had tied her brain into knots.

"Your opinion, Annie Oakley."

The woman turned and walked out the other door. Before Kara could collect her senses, it was too late. The woman was gone, followed by the other three women from her table. She had disappeared into the night without Kara's apology. All Kara could do was stand there staring at the door, wondering what had just happened. She pushed her hat back on her head and ordered a shot of tequila, muttering to herself about being stupid.

"Hey, Kara," a woman said, sliding her arm around Kara's waist. "Long time no see."

"Hey, Crystal," Kara replied, her eyes still on the door.

"What was all that about?" Crystal was a woman in her thirties with many nature gifts and willing to share them with the right women.

"I have no idea what that was about," Kara said, tossing back the shot.

"I've never seen her here before, but I don't think she's the bar type." Crystal took a long drink of her beer.

"No, I don't think so either."

"Wanna dance?" Crystal had worked her fingers into the waistband of Kara's jeans.

"Sure," Kara said, relieved to have something to take her mind off the brunette and her general brain meltdown preventing her from apologizing. Kara let Crystal lead the way to the dance floor.

It was a slow song, which had most couples swaying and holding each other close. When Kara draped an arm around her waist, Crystal immediately draped her arms around Kara's neck and nestled into her strong shoulder. She was just over five feet tall, but she used every inch of it to her advantage against Kara's nine-inch advantage to get her attention. Her ample bosom pressed against Kara's ribcage, and one of her muscular thighs was nestled between Kara's legs.

"Where are you holding up, Kara? I've missed you."

"Working," she replied. She knew Crystal wasn't interested in a detailed description of her life. She wanted one thing and one thing only from Kara, and it had nothing to do with being polite or curious.

Crystal allowed her hands to glide down Kara's back, her nails tracing a path through her shirt.

"It's really crowded in here," Crystal said as they were jostled by other dancers. She let her hand linger on Kara's firm behind. It was obvious that all Kara needed to do was suggest they step out for some fresh air, and Crystal would bolt out the door like a shot. Kara hesitated for a moment, deciding if she wanted to leave with Crystal tonight. She hadn't really planned on it. She was open to possibilities, but not necessarily with Crystal. But why not? She had already made a fool of herself in front of the brunette. Why not redeem herself and her self-respect? One thing was certain, Crystal would gladly accept Kara for who she was, and there would be no strings attached. Tonight, she needed that.

Kara hooked a finger in Crystal's and led the way outside. The sky was filled with bright stars, and the air was clean and warm. The blaring music could be heard from the parking lot, but it was muted. Crystal pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to Kara. Kara shook her head but took Crystal's lighter and lit her own.

"Oh, right. You don't smoke."

"No," Kara replied. "I have other vices, just not that one."

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

"They're your lungs. Do as you please."

"I want to show you something, Kara," Crystal said, tugging her by the hand to the back corner of the parking lot.

"What?"

"My new truck," she replied, pointing to the shiny new pickup truck in the farthest corner, its hood tucked under a large tree. It was shielded by a privacy fence on one side and a metal dumpster on the other. Kara wondered how long Crystal had circled the parking lot waiting for that spot to open up. The only more private space would be a garage. "What do you think? Nice, huh? Of course, it's not really mine yet. It belongs to the bank. But I can drive it and make the payments."

"So it's partially yours," Kara offered, surveying the bright red body and chrome wheels. She had no idea why Crystal would buy such a tall truck that she'd need a cattle prod to get into. She was short, prim, and worked at the DMV. Unless, of course, the truck was bait for cowgirl jeans and boots like Kara.

Crystal crushed her cigarette in the gravel and checked her appearance in the side mirror, running her fingers through the stray locks.

"I just hate it when my hair won't behave. It's got a mind of its own."

"Looks fine to me," Kara replied, knowing she should say that.

"You really think so?" Crystal asked with a hopeful smile.

"Yeah, I like it. I like long hair."

Kara was standing behind her as Crystal looked in the mirror, the faint light from the Rainbow Desert plate bathing the parking lot. She tossed her hair, the long cascades falling over Kara's shoulder.

"You should have seen it a few years ago. It was past my waist. You would've liked that, I bet."

"I bet," Kara said, stroking Crystal's hair as she leaned against her.

"It was so long it covered my whole butt."

"Would've been a shame to cover up a nice butt like yours." Kara pressed herself firmly against Crystal's round behind and crossed her arms around her. Crystal responded with a soft sigh as she slowly ground against Kara's pubic bone. Kara kissed her neck as she unbuttoned Crystal's blouse.

"I'm glad you like my hair," Crystal whispered, tilting her head back, exposing her neck to Kara's kisses.

"Uh-huh," she replied as her hand slid inside Crystal's blouse and cupped her breast. Her other hand found the clasp of the bra in the back and quickly undid it. Kara let out a primal growl as she touched Crystal's breasts. She arched her back, pushing her breasts into Kara's hands. Her dark nipples immediately hardened and stood erect as Kara's nimble fingers massaged them.

Kara undid Crystal's jeans and slipped her hand inside, sliding down her smooth abdomen. Kara's fingers passed over her hairless mound. The thought that Crystal had shaved her pubic region gave her a sudden jolt, the image of her careful movements exciting something deep down.

Crystal moaned as Kara's fingers parted her folds and slipped inside her. She started a deliberate and slow grinding as Kara slid in and out of her. Crystal covered Kara's hand with hers, pressing it harder against her need.

"That's it," she moaned, closing her eyes. "Harder. Harder." Kara complied with deeper, firmer strokes. The night air was sticky. Kara could feel sweat trickling down Crystal's cleavage and soaking into her jeans, mingling with her own dampness. The music from inside the bar set a rhythm that matched the one driving Kara's strokes and Crystal's moans. Kara pinched her nipple and pulled it as Crystal tensed, signaling her orgasm was near. Crystal's body throbbed to the music. She let out a muffled cry as she reached her climax, clutching Kara's hands over hers, savoring the last precious moments of pleasure.

"Oh, baby," she sighed, leaning back against Kara. "No one can do what you do."

Kara kissed her neck and slowly withdrew her hand from Crystal's jeans. When the sound of voices came from the other side of the parking lot, Crystal quickly buttoned up her shirt and straightened herself. Nothing was said between them. No words of tenderness, no insistence that they'd see each other next time Kara was in town.

"I better head back inside. My friends will wonder where I am." Crystal grabbed her purse from where she had hung it over the side mirror and hurried off as if nothing had happened.

Kara leaned against the truck and closed her eyes. She was tired, tired of the endless parade of meaningless sexual partners. When was someone going to love her, not just lust after her? When was someone going to need her to love them? But Kara didn't know how to ask for that. It wasn't her style. Those casual and irreverent connections didn't require thought or emotional effort. They also didn't carry any potential hurt. They were safe. They couldn't break her heart if the women didn't love her first.

Kara went back inside, washed her hands in the women's restroom, and ordered a beer. Tomorrow, she would meet Lion's daughter, talk to her, and then head home to her own world and her own bed.

Chapter 4

Kara was halfway home before she could get Lena Luthor out of her head. Those expressive green eyes and dark cascading waves circulated in her thoughts like an old record stuck in a groove. As much as she didn't want to admit it, Kara knew that Lena might have agreed to talk to her father just to get her off her back. It was quite possible that Lena Luthor would never set foot on her father's ranch or in Harland. But Kara had done her best. She had talked to her. She had given her the hard, cold facts about her father. And she did it without raising her voice or cursing, at least most of the time.

"I bet she doesn't do short and thick," Kara muttered, searching the radio for a country station. "She's too fancy to help that old man."

Kara tried to focus on her work. She had equipment to fix, paperwork to finish, and a mountain of laundry to do, not to mention helping out with the rodeo in four more sections of the range. She rolled down the window and tapped the side of the door in time with the music. She'd be home by two and in the saddle by three. She almost wished she hadn't gone to the Rainbow Desert the night before. She came out with nothing but frustration—and an angelic vision she couldn't get out of her head. Too bad the woman attached to the vision was a bitch, she thought.

She delivered the groceries, ate a piece of her mother's pie, and listened to her ranch gossip. In twenty minutes, Kara knew that J'onnn's oldest granddaughter had a boyfriend with a pirate tattoo on his back, the youngest granddaughter lost her first tooth, earning a new Barbie doll for her efforts, Aunt Angeline had gallbladder surgery in Lubbock, Jeremiah cut his thumb to the bone on a baler, and Lexie's truck had a new bed liner. Nothing extraordinary, except for the way information transfer seemed to please her mother. Eliza was fifty-nine with gray-blond hair. Her face belied the early wrinkles of age. She was a cheerful, kind, devoted woman, full of energy and concern for her family and friends.

"How was your trip to San Antonio, honey?" Eliza asked, pouring Kara a glass of milk.

"The highway's being paved between Spruce City and Twin Oaks. When you go to Uncle Jack's, go around the other side so you don't get caught in the traffic. Other than that, it was fine."

"Sounds nice."

Kara knew her mother understood why she went to San Antonio once a month. How could she not? Eliza had accepted that her daughter was gay. She didn't ask for details. She wanted Kara to be happy and trusted her to find happiness safely and responsibly. When she was younger, Eliza assumed that Kara would ask if she had questions about sex, but once she came out to her parents during her freshman year of high school, Eliza seemed to hold her breath, afraid Kara might ask something she had no idea how to answer. Eliza wasn't homophobic. She was just naive. Kara could tell her mother that she went to San Antonio to pick up girls at a gay bar, but Eliza would just furrow her brow, wondering how women could have sex. The subject was best left alone.

"I heard you were meeting Lion Luthor's daughter."

"Yeah, I did." Kara crumbled the last crumbs of crust on the back of her fork and licked them up.

"Your father is so angry about it. He was cussing and talking about cut fences and stolen cattle all day yesterday. And he damn near fell off the roof when he found out the poor old man was coming home."

"They let him out?" Kara grimaced. "That was quick. Did he sleep with the judge or something?" Kara took her plate to the sink.

"Kara," Eliza scolded with an annoyed look. "That's a terrible thing to say."

"He had eighty head of our cattle in his pen, cut thirty yards of our fence, and only got stuck one day. Someone got paid somewhere."

"The sheriff said Lion has a hearing before the judge next Friday. He's on his own until then."

"Recognizance," Kara supplied, leaning against the counter with her arms crossed.

"Yeah, I guess that's what he said."

That's a joke. Being on your own recognizance means the person has some responsibility for their own actions. Lion Luthor has none of that. By Friday he'll have done something else stupid. Kara went to the back door and looked out over the valley. "I'd better go, Mom. I've got things to do. By the way, I'm taking one of the horse trailers to town to get tires tomorrow, so let me know if you need anything." She hugged her mother and kissed her cheek.

"Drive safe, dear." Eliza walked her to the truck, affectionately patting Kara's back. "Come for dinner one of these nights, dear."

"I will, Mom. Thanks for the pie. It was great." Kara started the engine and pulled away, her mother waving from the steps. "Why am I paying taxes if they release Lion in just one day? What kind of justice system is this?" she muttered to herself, hitting the steering wheel.

Kara got home and went to work on housekeeping. She caught up on laundry, mopped the kitchen floor, burned a heap of trash in the pit, and checked on the ranch's orders and contracts. That evening, she checked on the two heifers she'd brought into the corral. They still hadn't calved and according to the calendar, they were at least two weeks overdue. The calves would be worth too much money to ignore and wait for nature to take its course. If nothing had happened by morning, she might have to induce labor before the calves got too big to harm the mother during birthing. Around ten o'clock that night, Kara was assisting one of the heifers, pulling her stubborn calf into the world. It was a strong calf. It stood up and immediately tried to kick at Kara. She laughed at the little black animal, not even steady on its feet yet.

"You sure are a stubborn little critter," she laughed, guiding it to its mother's teat and the protective colostrum. The other pregnant cow seemed to have learned what was expected of her and gave birth as well, dropping a healthy bull calf. Kara kept them in the corral, tossing out an extra bale of hay for the new mothers and their offspring.

The next morning, she hitched the one-axle trailer to her truck and headed for town, hoping to have the tires mounted and be back home by lunchtime. The shortest route was the dirt road to Cactus Flats, then the rutted, seldom-used road to Harland, entering town from the north side. The best route was the paved road through Steelville and then back to Harland on the highway. But that was thirty miles longer and not necessarily faster. Kara took the road to Cactus Flats. The empty trailer jostled along the ruts, rattling noisily as she crossed cattle guards and potholes. The highway department had recently graded the road, leaving a ridge of stones and dirt on either side. It made little difference in terms of road smoothing, and Kara always wondered why they didn't just lay down a layer of tar and a layer of gravel. It would last longer and be easier on vehicles.

"Hey, Dad," she said, answering the touch on her cell.

"You didn't say Lion's daughter was going to have a talk with him?" Jeremiah said angrily.

"That's what she said." Kara could tell by his voice that something was wrong, something more than the usual troubles.

"Well, either she lied to you or he's ignoring her. J'onn found a whole section down. This time he did more than cut the wire. This time, he pulled a dozen posts out of the ground. The old fool knocked them down with his truck. You can see the tire tracks where he ran over them. We've got cattle all over the place. In his place, some in the pasture with the hay bales, and some wandering out on the road. That old man tested me one time too many."

"Where's the damage? Same spot as last week?" Kara asked, picturing the work they had cut out for them.

"From Sweetwater Spring to the corner."

"Yeah, same spot. It's new wire."

"It ain't new no more," Jeremiah snapped. "He cut it into two-foot pieces and tied it up with string."

"Sounds like he's been busy." Kara had to chuckle, imagining the old man meticulously cutting four strands of barbed wire and tying them into bundles. She wondered how many times he had cut himself.

"It ain't funny, Kara. I've had enough. I'm suing him for every penny he owes me. I've got a list of everything he's cost this ranch." Jeremiah had worked hard, and he wasn't going to be denied his rant.

Kara couldn't help but wonder if Lena Luthor did what she promised and talked to her father. She had no reason to believe that Lena would have lied to her, but if Lion really destroyed another section of the Danvers fence, her words must have fallen on deaf ears. If Lena was right, if her father was succumbing to senile dementia, maybe all the words, pleas, and warnings in the world wouldn't have made any difference.

"I'm on my way to town. I'm going to have a talk with Sheriff Austin. Tell J'onn not to touch the fence until he gets there to look at it. He'll need evidence to prosecute, again."

"Lion was right there. He admitted to doing it. He said it was his fence. He said he didn't like it there. He wanted to move it to the other side of the river."

"What river? There's no river there," Kara scoffed.

"J'onn said he was standing there in his old greasy straw hat and his worn-out boots. You wanna know what else he was wearing?"

"What?" she asked, not entirely sure if she cared.

"None of it. He was as naked as the day he was born."

"You're kidding? Naked?" She laughed at the thought.

"Yeah. I bet he got a hell of a sunburn." Jeremiah laughed triumphantly as if that served Lion right for trashing his property.

"Bet he did." Kara immediately thought of Lena. She must be right. Lion had completely lost touch with reality and was beyond reasoning. Kara couldn't help but feel sorry for both Lena and Lion.

"I gotta go," he said. "We're on our way to get the cows off the road."

"Do you need me to come out there?" she asked, suddenly regretting not being available.

"Nah. We'll handle it. You go on to town. J'onn said you might as well pick up a few rolls of wire if there's any left in Harland." Jeremiah hung up.

Kara tossed the phone onto the seat and shook her head in disgust.

"Well, Mrs. Luthor, looks like you didn't do much."

Kara pressed the accelerator, eager to get to town. As much as she didn't want to sue a helpless old man, she knew the Cottonwood Ranch couldn't keep excusing random acts of vandalism and theft. Maybe her father was right. Pinching Lion in the pocketbook might be the only way to stop him.

She pulled off her hat and tossed it on the seat, then raked her fingers through her hair, something she did when she was mad enough to spit rocks. She roared down the road, kicking up a cloud of dust behind her. The ruts tugged at the steering wheel, making the truck swerve back and forth. She eased off the accelerator and got the trailer under control. She heard a thump and the trailer jerked hard to the left.

"What now?" she yelled, taking her foot off the accelerator and allowing the truck to coast to a stop. She looked out the window, craning her neck to see the trailer tire. But she really didn't need to—the loud thump and the pull on the steering wheel meant it was flat. Disgusted, she got out and slammed the door hard. The trailer had come to rest against the ridge of plowed earth and rocks, partially buried in the soft material.

"I don't have time for this today," she muttered, kicking the flat tire with the toe of her boot. She thought about calling Lexie and asking her to bring the portable air tank and a can of fix-a-flat, but that would take longer than if she changed it herself.

Kara rummaged through the toolbox for the scissor jack and lug wrench. She'd have to remove the flat tire, unhitch the trailer, take the tire into town to get it fixed, and then come back for the trailer. Not bothering to leave the trailer on the side of the road. It would be safe. The painted poplar on the side told anyone passing by that this was a Danvers trailer. Besides, she hadn't passed a single vehicle since she left home and would probably be back before anyone came along.

It took a bit, but she finally found a flat, solid enough spot to support the jack. She lifted the trailer just enough to roll the tire out and tossed it into the back of the truck. She planned to wedge the hay bale she was carrying under the axle for support, but the weight of the trailer started sinking it into the soft dirt alongside the road, too far to allow room for the bale. She needed to lift it higher. As she lifted the trailer, it moved toward the ditch.

"No, no, no," she muttered, trying to shove the bale under the bumper, but felt the ground give under her feet. She grabbed the trailer to regain her balance, but it was too late. The dry earth was too soft to hold her weight and gave way. Not only was Kara slipping into the ditch, but the trailer was slipping too. The hay bale was crushed as the axle gouged a depression in the rocks and weeds. She couldn't stop it. The trailer slid down the embankment, the torque wrenching the trailer hitch and safety chain.

"Whoa, baby," Kara called as she pushed hard on the steering wheel, but she wasn't a match for it. She could hear the violent sounds of the hitch as the trailer's tongue twisted on the ball. She knew the hitch was designed to pull the trailer down the highway, but the runaway action meant that in case of a rollover, the trailer hitch would be released and wouldn't flip the truck with it. Kara dug her heels into the ground and braced herself against the slow but steady sliding trailer. She was

well beneath the trailer, standing at the bottom of the ditch. Suddenly, the hitch snapped. The front of the trailer swung toward the embankment, the sound of the tongue scraping against the road and then digging into the earth.

"Stop. Stay there, you bastard," she muttered, gritting her teeth as she pushed against the side.

The axle dug into the earth and came to a halt, but the front of the trailer kept descending the slope until the weight started tipping in Kara's direction.

"NO!" she screamed as the trailer slowly tilted over her. She tried to get out of the way, but her boots were too deeply buried in the soft earth. The trailer fell onto her, pushing her backward and pinning her at the bottom of the ditch. The ditch was deep enough to offer her a protective well of the entire weight of the heavy trailer, but she could hear the distinct sound of two snaps, then a sharp pain shooting up her legs, a pain that left her breathless and immobile. She cried out in agony as the metal side landed on her lap, crushing her into the warm earth. She clung to the trailer as if embracing it would alleviate the unbearable pain when the bumper pressed against the lower parts of her legs. She felt the pain instantly sap her strength, leaving her helpless to even move her arms. She gritted her teeth and fell backward, her head striking a small rock—and everything went black.

Chapter 5

"Kara, wake up, sweetheart. Open your eyes. Come on, it's time to get up now. You'll be late for school if you don't open your eyes this minute. Kara. Kara. Open your eyes. Kara Danvers, answer your mother. Breakfast is on the table. Come now." The school bus was waiting outside, honking and flashing its lights. A stream of kids was getting on and off through the open door, running around the bus, laughing at her for not opening her eyes. A cattle trailer was rolling her way, its tires swaying and thumping on the road's rocks. Her mother was on the porch, waving to the bus and the kids as they kept jumping, laughing, and playing. "Kara. Open your eyes now, sweetheart."

Kara's mother's voice floated in and out of her consciousness. Kara wanted to respond. She wanted to open her eyes. She was trying, but they wouldn't open. Someone was keeping them shut. She also wanted to move. But someone was holding her legs down. She tried to move her hand, but it felt like it weighed a ton. Nothing would respond to her efforts.

"Kara, sweetheart. Open your eyes." Her mother's voice drifted toward Kara through a fog, growing louder and clearer. "It's Mom, sweetheart. You're okay. It's all over now. You're going to be fine, sweetheart."

Kara could feel her mother's lips pressing a kiss to her forehead, the kiss she remembered from her childhood when she came running home with a scrape, tears streaming down her face. She struggled to open her eyes. A bright light blinded her vision, and she closed them again.

"That's it. Open your eyes, sweetheart." Eliza stroked Kara's hair.

Kara blinked and strained against the strong light to see her mother's face.

"There you are," her mother murmured, leaning over her, giving a cautious yet concerned smile. Kara raised her hand a few inches, feeling a sharp pain with every movement. She tried to speak, but nothing came out.

"Easy now. Just rest," Eliza said soothingly. "I'm here for you, sweetheart." She patted Kara's head and kissed her.

When Kara woke up again, she could hear voices, women's voices talking about things she didn't understand. They were technical things and sounded like medical terms.

"Hello, Mrs. Danvers," a friendly voice said. She was moving Kara's arm and wrapping something around it. There was a sensation of tightness. Kara tried to pull her arm away, but the woman held it firmly. "You're okay. I'm just measuring your blood pressure. Relax your arm, sweetheart."

Kara didn't understand what was happening, but she did what she was told. She relaxed and closed her eyes. When she did, she realized her legs hurt, and they hurt badly. They felt like they were on fire. She opened her eyes again and tried to reach for them, but she couldn't move. She wanted to scream from the sudden burst of pain, but she couldn't make any sound or move.

"Are you in pain?" the woman asked, releasing Kara's arm and tucking it under the covers. "Do you need something for the pain?"

Kara nodded, her eyes pleading for the woman to alleviate the pain. The woman's face disappeared. Kara wanted to call her and tell her to come back, but she couldn't make any sound. She closed her eyes, the pain burning into her soul. She tried to pull away from it, but her body wouldn't respond.

"This will help, sweetheart," the woman's voice said, patting her shoulder. In a moment, Kara could feel a sensation of warmth over her, and she drifted back to sleep.

The next time she opened her eyes, the room was dark. Kara heard the rhythmic beeping sound. She could smell something pungent. It reminded her of bleach and cleaner. She turned her head toward the sound and saw a maze of plastic tubes coming out of a machine into her arm. The lights on the machine were blinking and pulsing as liquid dripped from plastic bags into the tubing. The pain she felt in her legs still throbbed and burned, making her sweat. She wished she could remove the covers from her body. Maybe she'd feel better if she could take them off. She looked down at her legs and was shocked to see both of them wrapped in bandages and suspended in slings, held a few inches above the bed. Her toes were orange and swollen. A sheet covered her from thigh to neck. She tried to touch her legs and the bandages that covered them, but she was too weak to reach them. She felt trapped in her body, aware that she was in pain but unable to do anything about it.

"Hello, sweetheart," her mother said, entering the room. She had a pained expression on her face, one that Kara remembered from when she was a little girl and fell off the pony, scraping her elbow to the bone. Eliza rushed to the bed and kissed Kara's forehead.

"Where am I?" Kara asked with a weak voice, surprised by the difficulty of speaking.

"I can't hear you, dear," her mother replied, leaning in closer.

"Where am I?"

"You're in the hospital, dear. Don't you remember? You had an accident with the trailer." Eliza stroked Kara sympathetically. "We were so worried. Your dad was here all day, but he had to go back to the ranch and take care of some things. He's going to regret not being here when you woke up." Her eyes filled with tears as she spoke softly to Kara. "But you'll be fine. It'll take some time for your legs to heal, but you'll be okay."

"Trailer?" Kara still didn't grasp what had happened to her.

"Yes, it rolled on top of you. Landed on your legs," she replied, stroking Kara's arm as if to soothe the reality of the accident. "J'onn found you. That man was so upset about it he could hardly talk. He and Lexie stood outside the operating room every minute you were in there. They didn't even sit down. They just paced, J'onn, Lexie, and your dad, back and forth."

"What happened to my legs?" Kara asked, her voice still weak.

"They're broken, dear. You had to have surgery on the left side. The doctor put in a plate and some screws. But he said you'll be fine. Don't worry. You'll just need some time to heal. They'll take good care of you, dear. You'll be up on your feet in a few months. You're a strong person. I know you'll be fine in no time."

Kara shook her head. She couldn't accept what her mother was saying. She didn't want to believe that she had broken her legs. It was all a dream, a nightmare. She wanted to wake up and go back to how things were before. She wanted to saddle her horse and go for a ride. She wanted the fresh Texas wind blowing through her hair. Kara closed her eyes tightly, trying to push away the news from her mother and the pain that consumed her.

"I'm sorry, dear. But the doctor said you just need to rest and get better. When your legs heal, you'll do physical therapy to regain your strength. You just need to be patient so your body can heal."

Kara shook her head. She gripped the sheet with both hands and tensed her body. She didn't want to accept it. She couldn't accept it. There was no way she could be confined to a bed with both legs suspended like this for months. She had things to do. There were calves to vaccinate and brand. There were heifers to care for with their first calves and fences to mend. She couldn't be stuck in a bed. She couldn't.

"Tell the doctor I need to go home," she said with her eyes closed.

Eliza gave her hand a gentle pat.

"Dear, you can't."

"Tell the doctor I need to go home," she repeated, her brow furrowed in determination.

"Kara, listen to me," her mother started.

Kara opened her eyes and fixed her mother with a demanding gaze.

"I have to go home today. I have things to do." Kara struggled against her confinement. She tried to sit up, pressing her hands against the bed. "Call the doctor. They need to take these things off my legs. I need to get out of bed." She leaned down and grabbed the bandages.

"Kara, no. Don't do this. Don't touch them. Lie down, dear." Eliza pushed at Kara's shoulders, trying to prop her up on the pillow. When she couldn't do that, she pressed the call button. A nurse entered the room and immediately grabbed Kara by the shoulders and pushed her down.

"You have to lie down, Mrs. Danvers. Please don't do this."

"I have to get out of bed. I have work to do. Take these things off my legs," she said, frantically pulling at the sheet and grabbing the slings.

"If you don't stop this, I'll have to restrain you, Mrs. Danvers," the nurse said sternly. "Now lie down and relax." The nurse grabbed Kara's wrists and pushed her back onto the bed. Kara was surprised at how weak she was. She considered herself a strong woman, capable of defending herself and carrying her own weight. But the effort she exerted left her utterly exhausted. She fell back against the pillow, her body spent.

"That's better," the nurse said, checking the IV and slings. "Now just rest. Would you like something to drink?"

Kara shook her head. She dozed fitfully throughout the night. She took a few sips of water, but she wasn't hungry or thirsty. The hours all blurred together, filled with pain, restless sleep, and muddled thoughts of how she would deal with her strange confinement. Her mother slept in a chair by her bed, occasionally coming to adjust her blankets and pat her hand. Kara tried once to convince her to go home, but she couldn't get the words to come out the way she wanted. She finally gave up, finding comfort in her mother's reassuring presence every time she opened her eyes.

"Mrs. Danvers," a new voice said. Kara opened her eyes. The window light brightened as the curtains were drawn. "Would you like a bath, Mrs. Danvers?"

Kara looked at the chair where her mother had spent the night.

"Your mom went down to the cafeteria for breakfast. She said to let you know she'll be back shortly. She's very kind."

"What time is it?" Kara asked through cotton-mouth.

"It's nine-thirty, sleepyhead," the woman said cheerfully. "Are you ready to face the day?"

Kara's eyes widened. She hadn't slept past nine since she was a kid with chickenpox. She couldn't believe no one had woken her up. She had a headache, and this woman's Pollyanna attitude was only making things worse.

"We'll give you a nice bath, and then maybe you'll want something to eat," the nurse said.

"I take showers, not baths," Kara said.

The nurse chuckled.

"You won't be taking showers for a while, dear. I'll get a basin of warm water and some towels. I'll be right back." The nurse disappeared into the bathroom. Kara could hear the water running as the nurse hummed cheerfully. She returned with a plastic basin of water, several towels, a clean hospital gown, a toothbrush and toothpaste, and a baby bath bottle. She rearranged the bedside table and pushed the IV stand to the head of the bed.

"I think I need to use the bathroom," Kara said, aware of her full bladder. She couldn't imagine this petite woman being strong enough to help her get out of bed and go to the bathroom on her own. The nurse didn't say anything. She continued to hum and arrange the bath supplies. "I said—"

"I heard you, dear. But you don't need to worry about that."

Kara didn't understand why she seemed so indifferent. This was one of the tasks, however unpleasant, that nurses had to deal with. Kara wished she didn't have to ask for help, but she knew she wouldn't be able to get up and out of the slings on her own.

"But—" she started. Suddenly, the urge left her. She didn't need to go anymore. "What happened?" Kara's eyes widened.

"You have a catheter, dear," the nurse replied and pulled back the sheet. "Let's get that gown off and clean you up."

Kara was still digesting the news of having a catheter when the nurse removed the hospital gown, leaving her exposed to the world. Her first instinct was to cover herself with her hands, but before she could move, she felt the comforting warmth of a towel against her chest. The nurse gently washed one breast and then the other, the comforting and familiar scent of baby bath filling the air.

"I love the smell of this. Don't you?" the nurse said as she soaped up Kara's stomach. "I think everyone loves the smell of baby bath." She continued washing, moving down Kara's abdomen. As she neared the pubic region, Kara closed her eyes. She didn't want to accept that she was thirty years old and needed to be washed by a complete stranger. The nurse washed her, parting her thighs and wiping between her legs. Kara gasped, her embarrassment growing as the nurse explored her intimate parts. When she rinsed and dried her, Kara was sure her face was a bright shade of red.

"Can you lift up a bit with the bar? I'll wash your back if you can."

Kara opened her eyes.

"What bar?" she asked.

The nurse pointed to the trapeze bar hanging over her head by a chain and attached to the

bedframe. Kara hadn't noticed it before. She tried to reach for it, but her arms felt like rubber. She lunged for it, but missed, and her hand fell back onto the bed. "It's okay. We'll do what we can," the nurse said. She helped Kara roll as far as she could to each side, washing the part of her back that was exposed. With the bath finished, the nurse applied lotion, massaging Kara's shoulders and arms with gentle strokes. She dressed her in a clean gown and covered her with a fresh sheet. She put a clean pillowcase on the pillow and helped Kara brush her teeth.

"We won't change the bottom sheet just yet. We'll need some help with that." The nurse poured out the water and rearranged the bedside table, leaving Kara clean but exhausted. She never thought a bath could be so strenuous.

"There's my beautiful daughter," Eliza said with a radiant smile as she opened the door and peeked in. "Did you have a nice bath, dear?" She rushed to Kara's side and began adjusting the sheet and pillow.

Kara just looked at her. She couldn't explain the humiliation of having a perfect stranger washing between her legs.

"What day is it?" Kara asked.

"Wednesday, dear. Don't you remember? Of course not," she chuckled. "You slept through Monday and Tuesday."

Kara looked out the window. She couldn't believe she had missed two whole days.

"Mrs. Danvers," another nurse said cheerily, bursting into the room. "How are you feeling? Do you have an appetite?" She was carrying a food tray. She placed it on the bedside table and rolled it in front of Kara. She then pressed the button and raised the head of the bed. "You might not want much, but see if you can manage a little." She removed the lid from the plastic plate to reveal a bowl of broth. It contained nothing and looked like Kara's bathwater after a day of rounding up cattle.

"What's that?" Kara asked, looking at the tray.

"Beef broth. And you have some jello squares. It's strawberry, I think. And a little tea. Do you like sugar in your tea, dear?" the nurse asked, trying to be cheerful.

Kara frowned at her. Eliza busied herself with Kara's food tray, tucking the napkin into her hospital gown and testing the temperature of the broth.

"It's not too hot, dear. This will be good for you. I haven't had a good cup of beef broth in years." She dipped the spoon into the bowl and brought it to Kara's lips. "Here you go, dear. We'll take it slow."

"I don't want any of this," Kara said through clenched teeth.

"Mrs. Danvers, you really need to eat something. The sooner you can eat solid foods, the sooner we can get rid of the IV," the nurse said. "We need you to regain your strength."

"I don't want any broth," Kara said, closing her eyes and turning away from the spoon.

"We can start with one of these jello squares," Eliza offered, cutting a piece and holding it up.

Kara shot a look at her mother.

"Would you prefer chicken broth instead?" the nurse asked, trying to be helpful.

"No. What I want is to get out of this bed and get dressed. I want a greasy cheeseburger and a large beer. I'll tell you what you can do with this tray."

"Kara!" her mother interjected sharply.

"How do you expect me to regain my strength by feeding me dirty water? Bring me a nice steak instead."

"Mrs. Danvers, you have to work up to that. Your body has been through a traumatic ordeal. You have to take it slow. Your digestive system might not be fully functional yet." The nurse gave her a sympathetic pat. "Don't worry, dear. Next week, we'll have you eating all sorts of things. The hospital makes a lovely meatloaf with mashed potatoes on Fridays and fried chicken cutlets on Mondays. Just be patient, and you'll be eating everything in sight in no time."

Kara looked at the nurse's patronizing tone.

"I don't plan on staying here long enough for meatloaf day," she declared.

The nurse looked at Eliza. Eliza shook her head, as if discouraging her comments.

"Well, I do. I'll be home tomorrow." Kara stared at her with determination.

"Dear, you might need to stay here a little longer than that," her mother said gently. "But they'll take good care of you. You don't need to worry about the ranch. Your father has talked to J'onn and Lexie. They can cover the work just fine. You just rest and get better."

Kara didn't like the nurse's condescending attitude, but her mother's was worse. She wasn't going to lie there and be treated like an invalid. She would be up and back to work in a day or two, three at the most. She wasn't going to be confined to a bed. She wouldn't be.

"Good morning," a man said, opening the door and entering. He was tall and distinguished-looking, slightly gray at the temples. His white coat was buttoned up neatly, and he wore a pair of shiny black cowboy boots. The name embroidered above his coat pocket read Dr. Elvin Potter, MD. He checked the chart he was carrying and smiled at Kara. "How are you feeling, Mrs. Danvers? How's the pain? Are they managing it for you?"

"Hurts like hell," she replied.

He chuckled and unpinned a safety pin from his lapel.

"Tell me if you feel this, Mrs. Danvers," he said, touching the tip of the pin to the sole of her feet.

"Ow," she winced.

"Good. How about this?"

"Ow, yeah," she replied, flinching at the prick.

He reattached the pin to his lapel and examined under the bandages.

"We'll be putting the casts on later today. The swelling looks better. You'll be more comfortable with the cast." He patted her leg and jotted something down on the chart.

"Can I go home today?" Kara asked.

"Not today," he answered, still writing.

"Tomorrow?"

"No. I don't think so, Mrs. Danvers. We don't want to rush this." He didn't look at her. He seemed determined to keep his eyes away from Kara's gaze.

"When?" she pressed.

"It's hard to say. You had a nasty accident. We had to put in six screws in your left leg. You have to take it easy for a while. Your right leg wasn't as bad, but it still needs time to heal." He took a small flashlight from his pocket and leaned in to examine Kara's eyes. "How's your head? Any headaches? Blurry vision? Dizziness?"

"No," she answered, wondering why he was checking her eyes when it was her legs that were bandaged.

"She was a bit confused yesterday," her mother chimed in.

"That was probably the anesthesia wearing off." The doctor listened to her heart and lungs with his stethoscope. "I don't think the concussion was too severe."

"What concussion?" Kara asked.

"Can you cough for me?" he asked, ignoring her question. She gave a small cough that sent a sharp pain through her legs.

"Sounds good. Your lungs are clear." He hung the stethoscope around his neck and felt her abdomen. He seemed satisfied with his examination and turned back to writing in his chart. "Are you eating a bit, Mrs. Danvers?" he asked, glancing at the unconsumed food tray.

"When they bring me something to eat, I'll eat," she replied.

Dr. Potter narrowed his focus and continued writing.

"Try to eat a bite or two. I need to see if your bowels are working." He closed the chart and turned to leave. "Let the nurse know if you need anything."

"Doctor," Kara called out. "When can I go home? Two days, three?"

He thought for a moment, then turned back to her.

"Mrs. Danvers, you'll need hospitalization and skilled nursing care for several weeks, maybe months. You got lucky. Your legs will heal. After rehabilitation, you should regain full use in both. But you can't rush the recovery. You can't bear any weight on them. No weight-bearing activity of any kind. You can't shower or bathe on your own. You can't even go to the bathroom without assistance. You'll need daily injections to prevent blood clots for weeks, as well as antibiotics for infections. You can't cook for yourself. You can't drive, shop, or even brush your teeth unless someone is here to help you. You'll tire easily and get cranky. You have to accept that, for now, you're like a newborn baby. You'll have to rely on help for everything you do." He looked at her with a gaze that froze Kara with the reality of her existence. "I'm sorry. But for a while, you're in bed, and in bed, you'll have to stay. In a few days or weeks, maybe you'll develop some mobility in a wheelchair, but your legs need to remain elevated. I'm sorry, but the best thing you can do is

relax, cooperate, and let the nurses take care of you." He turned and left the room, leaving her with his words echoing in her mind. The nurse followed him, closing the door behind her.

Kara turned to her mother for reassurance. The look in her eyes told Kara it was true. The doctor had given an accurate description of her life and what she could expect in the immediate future. To Kara, the news seemed to get worse by the hour. What started as confusion and pain had progressed to embarrassment, humiliation, disappointment, and now anger. She slowly turned her gaze to the window as a tear rolled down her cheek. She couldn't stop it, and this vulnerability only heightened her frustration. Kara Danvers doesn't cry. That wasn't her style. She always suppressed whatever was wrong and maintained a certain confidence in her voice and actions. She closed her eyes, wiping away the last tear.

"Dear, you'll be okay in a few months. Dr. Potter told me that," Eliza spoke softly. "He's a good doctor. He told us you got lucky and you'll have full use of your legs again. Don't worry, dear. Your father and I have full confidence in him and his medical skills. We're here for you. You don't have to eat beef broth if you don't want to today," she said, applying her best motherly skills and soothing words.

"I hate this," Kara said quietly. She looked scared and helpless.

"I know."

"I really hate this," she repeated, swallowing hard to hide the fear that threatened to burst into loud sobs.

"I know, dear. But your father or I will be here every day to visit you. And I'm sure your friends will come to visit you too."

"I don't want anyone to visit me. You don't understand, Mom. I don't want to be here." She looked away, anguish festering in her soul.

Eliza's chin trembled as she looked at her daughter.

"I wish I could take you home, dear. But I can't. I don't know anything about medicine or broken legs. I can't give you injections or do your physical therapy. We have to trust the people who know how to take care of you. I feel terrible about this, dear, but you know I couldn't lift you or turn you since my surgery. I don't think I could even carry a pot of water to bathe you." Tears streamed down Eliza's face as she sat in the chair beside the bed. "I wish I could take care of you, dear. I wish I could take you home now, just like I used to when you were a little girl. But I can't. I'm so sorry," she said through the tears.

"I know," Kara said, touching her mother's hand as she clung to the sheet. "I know, Mom. I know you can't do this. Don't cry. I'll be okay." Kara forced a smile for her mother to see. "You go home, Mom. You've been here for three days. Go home and rest."

"No, dear. I'm not leaving you. I want to stay. You might need something." Eliza sprang up, reverting to her protective mother stance.

"It's alright, Mom. I've got all these nurses waiting to wash me, stick me, and feed me. You go now. I think I'm going to take a little nap." Kara nodded and squeezed her mother's hand. "I'm getting a bit tired." She felt her eyes grow heavy.

"Are you sure, dear? I don't mind staying here with you. Really, I don't."

"Yeah, I'm sure. I could sleep all day. You never know." Kara weakly smiled. "Call me

tomorrow." Kara closed her eyes and soon drifted off to sleep.

Eliza gathered her things, kissed Kara on the forehead, and left the room on tiptoe, closing the door behind her.

Chapter 6

Kara slept most of the day, not waking up until the dinner tray was placed on the bedside table. It was chicken broth and blue gelatin cubes, along with a popsicle. She ate some of it, still grumbling about the liquid diet she was forced to accept. Her legs still throbbed, but the doctor was convinced that the swelling wouldn't be a problem, and he had replaced the inflatable air casts with rigid plaster ones that went from mid-thigh to her toes. It was past seven when Kara heard heavy footsteps coming from the hospital corridor, and the brim of a cowboy hat peeked through the door.

"Hey, kiddo," Jeremiah said, looking cautiously. "You decent?"

"Geez, no, Dad. When was I ever decent?" Kara replied.

"You got a point there," he said, chuckling as he entered the room.

"How are things?" she asked, reading his nervous expression. She knew her father hated hospitals. The thought of his only daughter lying in a bed with casted legs must be torturous for him. A bead of sweat formed on his upper lip as he looked at her legs.

"J'onn said that heifer you wanted him to keep an eye on still hasn't given birth. He brought her into the barn last night." Jeremiah tried to keep his eyes away from Kara's casts, but it was a struggle.

"Good. If it's a bull, I want to take a look. We might want to keep him. I'll decide once the heifer calves."

"Yeah, we'll take a look at that." Jeremiah took off his hat and fiddled with it, trying to hide how uncomfortable he was. "J'onn's whole family sends their regards. He's really sorry about your accident."

"They fix the fence?" she asked, concerned about what she wasn't able to do while stuck in the hospital.

"Yeah. New posts. New wire."

"Good," Kara sighed as a twinge of pain shot up her leg. She tried not to wince, but it was hard to hide. "Anything else?" she asked, shifting in bed to help alleviate the pain.

"Your mom said the fridge in the medicine shed broke down? Compressor went out."

"Which one? The big one or the small one?"

"The big one," he said.

"We lose the meds in it?"

"No. One of the guys caught it in time. I got a new one in the back of the truck. Need to get it home before dark. We filled the old one with ice to keep the stuff cool."

"You better go then," she said, knowing he was hoping this news would excuse him to leave.

"Yeah, I reckon so." He carefully put the hat back on his head and adjusted it. "You need anything?" He looked around the room. "How about some magazines?"

"I don't need anything, Dad. What I need is to go home, but I can't convince the doctor to agree to that."

"Heard you loud and clear. Hate knowing you'll be stuck here for three months."

"Three months?" she choked. "Who told you three months?"

"Your mom said the doctor told her you'll need 24/7 help until your legs heal up and you regain your strength. She's really upset she can't do it. I reminded her of her back surgery and told her she'd just end up hurting herself more. She can barely get out of a chair sometimes."

"Yeah, I know. She can't take care of me. I don't want her getting hurt. Tell her I said not to be upset about it."

"Too bad we don't have a nurse in the family to take care of you at home. If you need shots or tying down, we got the manpower for it," he chuckled.

"Yeah," she replied, chuckling softly.

"Guess I better go," he said. "You call me if you need anything, Kara. You hear me?" Jeremiah came to the bedside and looked at her, his eyes moist and sad. "Anything, you call me." He squeezed her arm and swallowed the lump that formed in his throat.

"I will, Dad. Don't worry about me. Tell Mom I'll be fine," she replied, watching him leave.

The room's door barely closed before it swung open again. Lexie entered, carrying the hat in her hand and a bouquet of wildflowers that seemed to have been hand-picked on the way into town.

"Hey, you're awake. How about this?" she said with a friendly smile. Like Jeremiah, she was uncomfortable in hospitals, but she hid it better than him. She had taken a shower, put on clean jeans and a shirt, combed her hair, and even polished her boots. Kara considered herself lucky. Lexie didn't do this for just anyone. The last time she removed cow hairs from her boots was for a ranch worker's wedding, something Lexie felt obligated to do as she was handing off the bride.

"Hey," Kara said with a groan, trying to sit up. She couldn't find a comfortable position and was beginning to show it.

"Are you okay?" Lexie asked, watching Kara's struggle with the bed.

"Oh, absolutely. I'm just all grace," she replied, making a face.

"Do you need some help?" Lexie placed the flowers in a plastic cup and tossed the hat on the chair. She tried to prop up Kara's shoulders, but it didn't help. There was no finding a comfortable spot.

"I'd rather be in my own bed at home," she said, pushing her head back against the pillow.

"Wish I could help you out, kiddo. But I don't know anything about nursing." Lexie seemed genuinely sorry for Kara. "Taking care of a calf, sure. But not a human."

"Yeah, Dad was here. He said the same thing. He said if I needed shots or tying down, we got the manpower for it. Both of them laughed."

"Yeah," Lexie teased. "We could rope you into a chute and give you those shots. Stick 'em right in your rear end. We could take good care of you," she added, throwing her head back and laughing heartily.

Kara narrowed her eyes. "Hey, that's a good idea, Lexie."

"What, stabbing you in the rump?" she asked, still laughing.

"No. Getting a home nurse to take care of me. Yes. If I had a nurse to give me the shots, I could go home and recover in my own bed. I bet I'd heal up much faster if I were at home, not stuck in here. Fresh air's good for you when you're sick. I've heard medical experts say that. Haven't you?" she asked, her enthusiasm growing for the idea.

"I guess so, but you're not sick, Kara. You're injured. Broken legs aren't considered sick, I guess."

"Even better."

"I don't know," she said, unsure if she should go along with Kara's plan or not.

"I wonder who you ask about getting a home nurse."

"I have no clue. The hospital, I guess. They sent Harvey home with a broken collarbone and had a nurse come check on him for a few weeks."

"I remember that. He said he had doctor's orders on what the nurse was supposed to do. He said he didn't have to do anything. The hospital took care of everything."

"Kara, this isn't the same thing. Harvey could walk on his own. All the nurse needed to do was help him rehab his arm. You can't do anything. You can't even pee by yourself."

"I'll learn to use that bedpan on my own," Kara insisted.

"You can't cook for yourself."

"Since when do I do much of that?"

"How are you going to go up and down the stairs to your room? Crawl?"

"There's a bedroom and a bathroom downstairs too. It's a bigger room than my room upstairs. I could move my bed down there." Kara had all the answers, and nothing was going to deter her. "I bet the home nurse will know who I need to talk to about the arrangements to go home."

"Probably," Lexie replied with skepticism. "Kara, I think you should wait a bit before planning to go home. You might do more harm than you've already done."

"I'll be fine. The hard part's over. I'm casted up, and I'll be getting this IV out soon. They want me to eat broth to regain my strength. It looks like dirty water, Lexie. Can you believe they think I'm going to get better by eating broth?"

"Tell them you need a steak," Lexie said with a laugh. "A nice aged Angus T-bone steak."

"I did. They said broth was better for me."

"I'll bring you a cheeseburger as soon as they take that IV out. How about that, kiddo?"

"You can bring it home in a few days. I plan to be home before you know it."

Lexie frowned but didn't say anything. She wanted to help, but she also wanted Kara to stop talking about going home. Lexie had always tried to protect Kara, even when she was an awkward teenager and was exploring her newly discovered sexuality. Whether out of family loyalty or

sisterhood, Lexie was and always would be Kara's personal guardian angel. When she heard about Kara's accident, she practically broke the land speed record to get to the hospital. Kara might not have been able to see it, but there was a faint twinkle in Lexie's eyes as she looked at the casts.

"Visiting hours are over," a voice echoed through the hospital speakers.

"I better get going." Lexie saw that Kara was still focused on her plans to get back home.

"Yeah. Thanks for coming, and thanks for the flowers. I didn't think you were the flower type."

Lexie blushed. She put on the hat to hide her red face that contrasted with part of her hair and the smile that curved on her lips.

"See you around," she said, tipping her hat as she walked out into the hallway.

The door had barely closed when Kara pressed the call button to summon the nurse, her eyes gleaming with her scheme.

Chapter 7

The small town of Harland, Texas, was big enough to hold all the necessities of life, including a bank, post office, restaurants, several churches, gas stations, three bars, and even a backstreet brothel. It was also small enough to have a courthouse that closed for lunch, bingo for Saturday night entertainment, and all the gossip its residents could handle. It was a cow town, born behind the dusty cattle drives that ran north to Dallas. Its main street had only been paved for a dozen years. The school, serving the western half of the county, didn't have a performing arts building until last year, an addition shared with the Future Farmers of America club. Its members routinely took home the top honors at the annual competition. Blue ribbon-winning heifers, bulls, sheep, goats, and horses roamed the local farms like weeds. The sign on the front door of the school read Congratulations Fair Winners — Knock Your Boots Before Entering. Cowboy hats had to be banned from the classrooms because they blocked the chalkboard view. It wasn't just the high school boys who sat in the cafeteria and talked about their trucks and get-togethers. The girls had their own stories of roping a stubborn calf or scrambling to get the hay in the barn before it rained. Living in ranch country meant learning ranching ways. Teens could rope and tie before they could drive. But not Lena Luthor. She was raised in Texas cattle country, yet couldn't tell an Angus from a Nelore.

Lena parked in a spot in front of the bank. She sat for a moment, leaning her head back against the seat and trying to calm her jittery nerves. She closed her eyes and focused on one of her sculptures. She could see every curve and fold of the metal, every welded joint and dramatic feature. She forced her mind to that place where she felt accomplished and confident in her work. She needed that comfort and assurance now. She needed to know that she wasn't what Lion had said about her. She finally got out, ready to conduct her father's business. The county clerk's office was on the second floor of the courthouse, and the sign on the door announced they'd be closed until one for lunch.

Lena hadn't even thought about lunch. Her stomach was still churning from the visit to Glen Haven, the nursing home on the outskirts of town. It was the only facility within sixty miles that had an Alzheimer's unit. It had been tough, but she, with the doctor's and the sheriff's help, had convinced her father that life would be simpler and more comfortable if he was closer to town. At first, he'd yelled angry, hateful things that had brought Lena to the brink of tears. But she knew not to give in under his relentless barrage. She'd smiled and kept her tone soft and encouraging, the way she'd reassure a frightened child on their first day of school. Finally, Lion's eyes had misted, realizing he couldn't fight it anymore. He'd looked off into nothingness, leaving his care and decisions for Lena to handle. He'd had a vacant look in his eyes, as if surrendering the fight for his freedom.

The sheriff had suggested that Lena stop first at the clerk's office with a tone that meant he knew something she didn't and probably wouldn't like. But now she had to wait while the county employee had lunch before finding out how many messes her father had created. Lena glanced at her watch. She had twenty minutes to kill, and she wasn't going to do it by walking down the green and beige hallway on the courthouse's second floor.

She reached for her sunglasses on the van's visor and headed up Beller Street, the bright blue sky against her face. Beller was the main street that ran from the feed store on one side of town to the Methodist church on the other. Micah Beller wasn't a historic figure or brave guru who'd given his name to the town's main street. He was the owner of a Wichita Falls paving company, who'd offered to pave Harland's main street with a new, experimental material as a test of its durability if the town agreed to name the street after him. It was a no-brainer. Harland's town council had no

problem agreeing to the offer. Little did Mr. Beller know, the Main Street signs were sitting in the town hall's basement, waiting for the time they could be put up.

Lena walked along the sidewalk, looking at the storefront windows and enjoying the warm breeze. She didn't mind the hot Texas summers. Even as a child, she liked feeling the warm sun on her face. Lena noticed the painting on the side of Ziegler's Furniture and Appliances store. The two-story brick building's mural depicting a late 1800s cattle drive still had bright blue sky, billowing dust waves, and Artemisia in bright, artistic detail. The name LK Luthor was still fresh and clear in the lower corner of the wall. It had been four years since Lena had painted the mural, a commissioned job that had helped with expenses during a particularly lean month. It had also led to two other jobs in town, one she'd accepted, the other not. But she'd never been much for painting water towers.

She studied the painting, looking for signs of wear or peeling. She'd used a good primer and top-quality paint. It should hold up for a good while. Her eyes flowed over her work's details, pausing at the tree situated on a hill. You had to be looking, but it was there, a little girl on a swing. Lena gave a cautious smile as she looked at the child, her long black hair trailing behind her as she gleefully swung on the swing. Lena swayed slightly as she watched the child, as if it were her suspended on the swing, floating back and forth on a carefree summer day. She could almost smell the sagebrush and buffalo grass drifting across the prairie. The lowing of cattle and the cowboy's whistles to keep the dogs moving really pulled her into the painting and brick.

Lena gazed at the mural, her eyes hypnotized by the vivid colors and tranquil setting. She stood with her hand against the wall and closed her eyes, hoping to revisit that child and that happy innocence. In her mind, she could hear a man calling to her, calling her name and urging her to swing higher. His voice was gentle. She couldn't see his face, but he was there, out of sight, over the hill. Lena could almost hear the little girl giggling as she swung higher, her bare feet reaching for the sky as she soared. The man watched the child with a fondness, drawing her even closer to the painting. Lena reached out and touched the girl she'd painted. The man's voice called to her again. It was Lion's voice, a gentler, softer Lion. It was a daddy's voice. Lena pulled her hand back and continued up the sidewalk. She wished she hadn't stopped to look at the mural.

Lena walked to the end of the block, crossed the street, and returned to the courthouse. She'd made a mental list of all the possible reasons why the sheriff might have thought she should stop at the clerk's office. It ranged from unpaid parking tickets to indecipherably signed documents, but nothing prepared her for what the clerk revealed behind his office door.

"Mrs. Luthor, we've been trying to work with your father for a few years now, but he simply hasn't taken our warnings seriously. I'm sorry. Lion has been a county resident his whole life. That's why we've tried to be lenient."

Calvin Henry was the recently reelected county clerk. He'd been a clerk for twenty-three years, and if there was something to know in Harland, he knew it. He wore Western-style slacks, black cowboy boots, a white Western shirt with a bolo tie, and a large Stetson hat big enough to knock down a hanger. His office walls were covered with photos of thoroughbred horses, his passion.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Lena said. "This paper says my father hasn't paid his property taxes for three years. How could that have happened? First of all, my father would never knowingly let his taxes lapse. He's well aware of the land's value. And second, why was he allowed to get this far behind? Why wasn't this addressed in the first year or even the second? But three?" Lena looked at the document Mr. Henry had handed her, her frown deepening by the second.

Mr. Henry leaned back in his leather desk chair, clasping his hands behind his head.

"We've done everything we know how to get him to take care of this. Registered letters, phone calls, personal visits. You name it, we've done it. Registered letters come back unclaimed. His phone is disconnected. He won't answer the door. I should tell you, if your father's spread were a bit larger, we never would've let it go on this long. The penalties alone on a big spread would be astronomical and nearly impossible to pay. But we were prepared to give him one more chance, but now..." he said, leaning forward and resting his hands on the desk.

"What now?"

"I heard your father moved to Glen Haven." Mr. Henry looked at Lena sympathetically.

"News travels fast in a small town." Lena sighed, knowing Lion's business was now fodder for every backside gossip.

"We really don't have a choice. I'm sorry."

"No choice for what? You want to sue him too?" she asked, a subtle edge in her voice.

"No. That wouldn't get us our money. We don't want anything bad to happen to your father, Mrs. Luthor. The fair and equitable thing to do is a sale."

"My father has nothing to sell, so he can't pay that amount," she said, pointing to the figure at the bottom of the second page. "Neither do I, for that matter."

"No. You don't understand, Mrs. Luthor. I meant to sell your father's ranch, the Little Diamond. We're prepared to auction it off," he said, glancing at his calendar. "On the twenty-ninth of next month."

"You can't do that," Lena declared angrily. "My father won't be ready to sell his ranch by then. He can barely remember what month it is."

"I'm sorry, but the foreclosure petition has already been filed. And your father doesn't need to be present. In fact, it's probably better if he isn't. All you need to do is remove his personal items from the house by that date. I'll contact you if anyone wants to see the house and property before the sale. We encourage potential bidders to see what they're getting into before they bid. I'm sure some of your neighbors will be seriously interested in your property. It's small by ranch standards, but it's got a good creek and adequate pasture."

"You're serious," she frowned. "You really plan to sell my father's ranch while he's in a nursing home."

Mr. Henry looked at her. His face told Lena everything she needed to know.

"Unless you can pay your father's taxes, I'm afraid we have no choice. If you read the county laws, you'll see we have the right to liquidate properties to pay owed taxes. We owe it to the other citizens of the county who pay their taxes on time. They have a right to expect fair treatment. If we don't collect from Lion Luthor, other residents will also refuse to pay. They'll figure if he can get away with it, so can they. Can you pay your father's taxes, Mrs. Luthor?"

"I've already told you, I can't afford this. I'm a freelance artist. I don't make that kind of money."

"Oh, yes. I remember. You painted the side of the appliance store. I like that. The cows look almost real." He gave a condescending smile.

"Mr. Henry, I'm starting on a commissioned job. It's not huge, but I'll be able to start making

payments come the first of the year. I'm sure I can work this out in a year or two."

"I forgot to mention that in November, a plant fee will increase next year's property taxes. That'll mean eighty-six more dollars on your father's property taxes. Of course, that's for the due amount in December. So, when you make any payments, the outstanding balance will be more than what's shown on that paper. That's what's due today. And then there's the penalty. The county tax fine is six percent per month, Mrs. Luthor." Mr. Henry seemed keen on piling on as much bad news as possible.

Lena looked at the paper. She wasn't reading, but she couldn't meet Mr. Henry's eyes. It was too painful. Her day was on a fast track to a headache. She'd already convinced her father he needed to live in a nursing home, essentially committing him to living behind locked doors. Now she was facing the impending sale of his ranch on the courthouse steps, the home she remembered from when she was a little girl. If things could get worse, she didn't want to know.

"Mr. Henry, I'm headed to the bank. I'm sure my father has funds in his account and as soon as I can get the bank to add my name to his checking account, I'll be able to write you a check."

He was already raising doubtful eyebrows.

"Maybe you should talk to the bank's customer service," he offered, escorting her to the door with a patronizing pat on the shoulder. She wasn't sure why she was getting the man's hurry out the door, but like the sheriff, Mr. Henry seemed to know something she didn't. "By the way, Mrs. Luthor, if you're thinking about selling his property on your own, there's a lien against the deed. You wouldn't be able to sell it without coming through this office."

"Mr. Henry, I have no intention of selling anything. And you shouldn't either. I'll be back." Lena exited the office door and crossed the street to the bank. The ten minutes she had to wait to speak to the customer service manager gave her more than enough time to digest the reality of what the county clerk had told her. She had expected her father to have financial issues, maybe one or two overdue bills. But she certainly hadn't expected the loss of his ranch...

"Hello, Mrs. Luthor. I'm Evelyn Treemont," said a woman in a black-and-white dress, greeting Lena with a pleasant, if reserved, smile. "Won't you come in?"

Lena took a seat in the strategically placed chair at the exact corner of the desk. She wondered if it was to keep the client off-balance. Evelyn closed the door and sat behind the desk.

"What can I do for you today?" Evelyn had a matter-of-fact tone.

"I suppose you know who I am and why I'm here. I need to add my name to my father's checking account so I can pay some of his bills." She placed the paper Lion had signed on the desk. Evelyn looked at it, then pulled up his account on the computer screen.

"Well, let's see," she said, perching a pair of granny glasses on the tip of her nose. "Luthor, Luthor. Here we are. Lionel J. Luthor," she said, looking up at Lena for confirmation. Lena nodded. The woman checked the paper again and typed something. "I see another name on this account. Lilian Marie Luthor."

Lena's eyes widened at the mention of her mother's name.

"That's my mother. I'm surprised my father hasn't removed her name after their divorce. She passed away several years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but no, it's still on here. But I don't see a problem. It looks like we can add

your name to the account if you'd like, Mrs. Luthor." There was something in her voice that sounded cautious.

"That's why I'm here. My father isn't capable of managing his affairs right now. I'll need some checks printed with my name as well."

"Well," Evelyn said carefully, still examining Lion's account.

"How long will it take to have some checks printed?" Lena asked, growing impatient with the woman's stalling tactics.

"Mrs. Luthor, I'm sure you'd like to help your father. I know I would if it were my father. I'd be happy to add your name to the account, but there's nothing in it. In fact, your father is overdrawn by three hundred and forty-five dollars that we can't get him to cover. We've frozen his account. We won't be able to issue any checks for you until that amount is paid."

"Three hundred and forty-five dollars?" Lena choked out in horror. "My father is overdrawn by three hundred and forty-five dollars? My father has never been overdrawn in his life. He's always been a good businessman and a successful farmer. He might not be as big a farmer as some, but he's always managed to pay his way." Lena was getting angry at what this woman was implying. Lion had been extremely careful with his money, that she knew. He was almost miserly in his approach to money. He also took great pride in his financial independence. "You must not be looking at the right account. He must have a savings account. Just transfer the money to his checking account and cover the overdraft fees. I authorize it."

The woman was already shaking her head slowly and sympathetically.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Luthor only has one account. He doesn't have one at the credit union either. We've checked."

"But what about his Social Security check? Isn't that direct deposit?"

"Yes, but with his utilities being automatically deducted and the checks he keeps writing, the overdraft charges keep piling up. We haven't been able to convince him to take those charges."

"So, on the first of the month, his next Social Security check should cover those charges, right?" Lena suggested.

"I imagine Mr. Luthor's check goes directly to the nursing home. That's what usually happens in cases like this."

"Cases like this?" Lena asked, straightening up.

"Yes. Cases where the patient doesn't have the financial means to cover room and board or the capacity to manage their own affairs. I'm sure Glen Haven has already put in a request for it. It was probably part of the paperwork you signed when he was admitted."

Lena wanted to stand up and defend her father's honor. But she was smart enough to know the woman was probably right. The automatic payment was the only way Glen Haven could ensure her father's expenses were covered. In the confusion and stress of admitting Lion to the nursing home, she somehow remembered something mentioned about Social Security.

"So, we'd be happy to add your name to the account, but I'm afraid all it would do is make you responsible for the overdraft fees. Are you sure you want to do that, Mrs. Luthor?"

"I absolutely want my name on my father's account," she stated, pulling out her checkbook from her purse. This woman wasn't going to intimidate her into avoiding her father's troubles. "What's the total of the overdraft fees?"

"Three hundred and forty-five dollars and eighty cents," the woman replied, reading from the screen.

Lena filled out the check and placed it on the table.

"Now you can reopen my father's account," she said and walked out the door.

Lena returned to the courthouse, but Mr. Henry was in a meeting, and she was forced to sit in the hallway and wait. As she waited, she tried to calculate how much money she could scrape together, but no matter how she crunched the numbers, she couldn't come close to what she needed to pay Lion's taxes, let alone the fines. Paying the overdraft fees had wiped out her checking account. She'd have to delay the van's oil change and the dryer repairs. It was summer. She could hang her clothes outside to dry. And she could tough it out a few more months without the van's air conditioning. The leak wasn't that bad. But how was she going to keep the Little Diamond from going under the auctioneer's hammer? She wondered what the interest rate on a personal loan would be. Then she remembered she was still paying off her new welder. If she returned it, she wouldn't have the monthly payments, but she couldn't build the sculptures for Merrill's town square, and she couldn't give up that job.

As she sat there planning and calculating, a steady stream of people entered and exited the offices up and down the hallway. A woman emerged from the county health department down the hall and pulled the door shut, but it didn't lock. Through the open door, Lena could hear someone speaking. It sounded like the woman was arguing on the phone with someone who wouldn't take no for an answer. Lena didn't want to eavesdrop, but she couldn't help it. The woman in the office was practically shouting into the receiver to make her point.

"If I had one, I'd tell you," she said in unequivocal terms. "What do you think? They grow on trees? This is Harland, not Dallas. We don't have resources like that."

Lena forced her attention back to her car keys, trying to ignore the woman's private conversation.

"The last time we had a CSN to provide that kind of care around the clock was six years ago. I know it's only for a few months," the woman continued. "No, she's not available either. She retired."

Lena couldn't help but catch the term CSN. It struck a deep chord. CSN, Certified Skilled Nurse. She looked out the window at the end of the hallway, a vacant expression on her face. She remembered the conversation with her mother's doctor as if it were yesterday.

"If your mother is serious about staying at home, you should be aware that she'll need a skilled nurse, a Certified Skilled Nurse, Mrs. Luthor. Maybe not right now, but eventually. She might only need occasional visits from aides at first, but pretty soon she'll need more. She'll need round-the-clock care. There will be things you won't be able to do for her. She might have to consider an assisted living facility, a nursing home."

The doctor's words still echoed in Lena's ears. She closed her eyes and sighed.

"Mrs. Luthor," Calvin Henry said, standing at the open door of his office. "I see you've returned. How did it go at the bank?" There was a smug look on his face, as if he already knew.

"I imagine you have a pretty good idea of how it went, Mr. Henry," she said, taking a seat.

"As I mentioned, if you have your father's personal effects out of the house soon, we can go ahead and start allowing bidders to take a look," he said, putting the folder containing the papers on Lion's property aside as if it were a done deal.

Lena didn't need him to sugarcoat the news, but she at least expected a respectful attitude from the man.

"How much do I need to pay to stop the sale?" Lena heard herself ask.

"How much?" He looked at her as if it were a meaningless question.

"Yes. How much would it take to halt the sale and prevent strangers from invading my father's house?"

"Why, all of it, Mrs. Luthor." He gave a small laugh. "We need the full amount to settle this matter. I told your father that. He thought he could pay twenty dollars and that would settle everything. That's not how business is done in this county."

Lena allowed her eyes to wander to the window for a long moment.

"If I agree to pay before the sale date, will you refrain from sending people to view the property?" she asked in a solemn, almost reverent tone, her eyes still fixed on the sky outside the courthouse.

"How do you plan on doing that?" He leaned back, rocking the leather chair at the desk as if mocking her question.

"Could you?" she repeated, giving him a piercing look.

"I'll tell you what. I'll give you three days to come up with a proposal for how you'll pay this. I won't post the sale notices until then. But three days is all I can offer, Mrs. Luthor."

"That will be enough," Lena replied.

She shook his hand and walked out into the hallway, clutching the car keys so tightly they cut into her palm. She went to the window and looked out at the trees, their branches swaying gently in the summer breeze. In that moment, she didn't know whom she disliked more, Kara Danvers for dragging her into her father's affairs or herself for not doing it sooner. Either way, playing the blame game wasn't going to help. The fact was, Lion needed help, and she wasn't going to turn her back on him. For better or worse, he was her father, and she was his only daughter, adopted or not. Lena squared her shoulders and put the keys in her purse. She turned around, walked down the hallway, and passed the door labeled County Health Department.

"Excuse me," she said to the woman behind the desk. "I understand you're looking for a CSN."

The woman looked up from her paperwork with curiosity.

"A CSN?" Lena repeated confidently.

"Yes, actually we're not, but the discharge planner in the hospital's home health services is."

"What does the job entail and how much does it pay?" Lena asked in a brisk, businesslike tone.

"I'm sorry, but do you know what a CSN is, miss?"

"A Certified Skilled Nurse."

"Do you know a CSN who might be interested in an interview for this position?"

"Yes. I do."

"You're a CSN?" the woman asked cautiously.

"Yes, I'm certified, and I have four years of experience. I did my training in Austin, at Memorial Hospital."

"Really? Are you currently employed?" the woman asked, her interest growing in Lena.

"I'm not currently working as a nurse's aide, but my certification is still active." Lena pulled out her ID and certification card and handed them to the woman. "Is this job here in Harland?"

The woman started typing things into her computer, pulling information from Lena's ID. She didn't answer Lena's question until she found what she was looking for on her computer.

"Here it is," she finally said, pointing at the screen. "Lena K. Luthor." She looked up at Lena. "It doesn't say what the K stands for."

"Kieran," Lena replied. It had been a long time since she said her birth mother's name.

"Oh," the woman said, going back to reading. "Well, it looks like everything's in order. Yes, you're a CSN, Mrs. Luthor."

"You thought I might be making it up? I was hoping you'd verify."

"You never know," the woman said, jotting something down on a sticky note and handing it to Lena. "This is the person you need to call to set up an appointment. Her name is Mrs. Hunter. They do their own screening. We just provide names for them to reach out to. I'll fax your certification information over to them. That should save some time. I understand this job will be available immediately. You might want to give her a call today."

"Are there other candidates for the job?" Lena asked, wondering if the woman would admit what she had overheard.

"Well, no. You're the only one for this type of job. They need a live-in caregiver."

"Can I call Mrs. Hunter from here?" Lena asked, seeing no reason to wait.

"Sure," the woman replied, dialing the number and handing the phone to Lena.

In a matter of minutes, Lena had an appointment at the hospital to meet with the discharge planner and had a general overview of the tasks required. General patient care included checking vital signs, administering daily injections, light household tasks, cooking for both her and the patient with no dietary restrictions, occasional grocery and prescription shopping—typical things Lena would expect and had done before. She was promised a private room and bathroom, a few free hours each week so she could visit her father in Glen Haven, and the best news of all, a bonus if she could start immediately. Lena agreed to meet the patient and the family before making a decision to take the job. If they didn't approve, she wouldn't be hired, as it was a privately paid assignment covered by the patient's insurance with the patient chipping in extra. The amount wasn't enough to buy a house on South Padre Island, but it was enough to raise Lena's eyebrows. It was enough to pay Lion's county taxes and fines and still have some left over to fix her welder, get

the air conditioning fixed, replace the van's eye, and repair the dryer.

"I'll be happy to meet with the family today, if it's okay with them." Lena didn't want to seem pushy, but the three-day grace period Mr. Henry had allowed was coming to an end. "Four o'clock is fine," she agreed with the woman on the phone. "Thank you. I'll stop by your office now."

By the time Lena got to her van and pulled out of the parking lot, she was wondering what had just happened. In the span of a few hours, she had placed her father in a nursing home, spent most of her money on his debt at the bank, made a promise to the county worker that she wasn't sure she could keep, and had an interview for a job she never wanted to do again. She had come to spend the day in Harland, and it looked like she was going to spend the summer. As long as she had time to work on her sketches for Merrill's sculptures, she didn't mind. But it was the first time in years she worked with music someone else played. As a commissioned artist, she was her own boss. She woke up early, worked when she felt like it, and occasionally worked through the night if she was in the mood. She loved every minute of it. Now she would be catering to someone else's needs and whims. But the money was good, good enough to pay off her father's debts and have a little left to sustain her through the rest of the summer. She had no doubt she could perform as expected. Once she settled into her nursing mode, the work would become automatic.

After an interview with the hospital's discharge planner, Lena was directed to Room 211 to meet the patient she would be caring for over the next eight to twelve weeks—a patient with two broken legs who refused to spend her recovery at the specialized hospital's nursing unit.

"Stop here and I'll have the paperwork ready for you to sign," Mrs. Hunter said, leading Lena to the elevator. "You'll need to make a list of household equipment you'll need. Once the doctor approves, we can order those things."

Lena was surprised by how quickly everything was coming back to her. The language, the terms—it was as if she had never stepped away from it.

"I hope the interview goes well," Mrs. Hunter said, a bit nervous. "I don't want to influence you, but you really are the only available and qualified candidate. If you don't accept, or if the patient doesn't accept you, she'll have to stay in the specialized unit for at least two months. And that idea won't go over well."

"She sounds like quite a stubborn patient," Lena replied.

"Yes, she definitely is," Mrs. Hunter agreed, raising her eyebrows dramatically.

The elevator opened, and Lena stepped in, confident and optimistic about her meeting with the patient. As the door closed, she realized she didn't know the patient's name. She knew it was a woman. She had overheard references to her. She knew everything about the case—medical history, age, medical prescriptions, everything except the name. If it was mentioned, she hadn't heard it. She briefly thought about going back to the office and asking, but the patient was waiting for her now, and showing up late wouldn't help inspire confidence. Lena put on a confident, yet friendly, smile on her face and opened the door to Room 211. The curtain was pulled halfway on the track, exposing only a pair of casted legs propped up in slings.

"You're back already?" a voice behind the curtain grumbled. "I told you, I'll let you know when I'm ready for my bath."

Lena recognized that voice, and it didn't bring a smile to her face.

"I'm not your nurse yet," Lena teased, but remained hidden behind the curtain. The shocking reality

of who was on the other side of that curtain hit her like a sudden stop.

Suddenly, the curtain was pulled back, and Kara Danvers scowled at her.

"What are you doing here?" Kara asked sharply, gripping the trapeze bar above her head.

Lena chuckled, starting slow. But soon, she was laughing hysterically, tears rolling down her face.

"I should've known. The way my day's been going, it couldn't have been anyone else," she said between laughter.

"What's so funny?" Kara asked, trying to sit up in bed. She didn't want to be the butt of anyone's joke, and certainly not Lena Luthor's.

"I should've known this job was too good to be true." As sympathetic as Lena felt for Kara's accident and broken legs, she still found the irony hilarious. She continued to laugh, both at herself and at everything else.

"I don't find anything funny," Kara retorted. She picked up the phone from her bedside table and dialed Mrs. Hunter. "I need another helper," she demanded, her eyes on Lena but her anger directed at the person on the other end of the line. "This isn't going to work. Find someone else."

Lena had managed to control the shock and humor of the moment. The harsh reality of the matter remained. Despite her brief but abrasive history, Kara represented a job and money that Lena desperately needed.

"Surely you can find someone else," Kara said with a scowl.

Lena stepped to Kara's side and took the phone from her hand.

"Everything will be fine, Mrs. Hunter," she said into the phone. "Yes, I'm sure we can work this out. Thank you." Lena hung up the phone.

"What are you doing?" Kara tried to reach for the receiver, but Lena moved it away. "I don't want anything worked out."

"I'm a CSN, the only one in the county as far as I know who's available as a live-in caregiver. And you need a live-in caregiver who's a CSN. You have two options, Mrs. Danvers. It's me or the specialized nursing unit. That's your choice." Lena didn't want to admit that she needed the job more than Kara needed her skills. For Kara, there was a second option. For Lena, there wasn't.

"I thought you were a welder." Kara pronounced the words like an insult. "I don't need a welder. I need a nurse."

Lena pulled her certification card from her wallet and tossed it onto the thin sheet covering Kara's lap. Kara examined it and handed it back with a flick of her wrist.

"If you're a nurse, how do you do all that metal stuff?"

"I have four years of experience as a nurse's aide. I don't use it, but I have the necessary skills so you can stay home while recovering from the accident. Need me to demonstrate? Want me to take your blood pressure or change your sheets, Mrs. Danvers?" Lena couldn't help but sound a bit condescending.

"No, I don't need you to do anything." Kara let out a displeased sigh. "I need a nurse for home care."

That's what I need."

"Mrs. Danvers," Lena began again in a gentler voice. "I know I'm probably the last person you wanted as a caregiver, and I must admit, you're not my favorite person right now either. But I really don't think you have a choice. If you're willing to give me a chance, I think we can make this work. I truly am a good nurse. We just have to ignore the other things. We'll just be a patient and a nurse. That's all. That's how we have to look at it." Lena was using her best diplomacy, and it seemed to be working. At least Kara leaned back on the pillow and wasn't yelling at her anymore.

"Are you sure you know how to take care of someone? I mean, the doctor said I needed daily injections. Can you do that?" Kara asked.

"Of course. I'll wear my welder's hood."

Kara hesitated, trying to decide if she could accept Lena or not. She desperately wanted her independence back, and it was entirely possible that Lena was the only way to achieve that. She tentatively shook Lena's hand. It was firm yet gentle, giving Kara an oddly secure feeling.

"Fine," Kara said, nodding her head. "Let's see how it goes."

"And we won't talk about cattle rustling. Agreed?"

"Okay."

"I'll inform Mrs. Hunter. We have a lot to do to get things ready for you to come home."

"I want to go today," Kara added.

"Are you planning on sleeping on the floor?" Lena asked. "If not, we need to get a hospital bed, a lift, a dresser, a wheelchair—lots of things to allow me to care for you at home. And we can't order them until the doctor signs off. So the first thing I need to do is take a look at your place and see what we need. And then the equipment has to be delivered and set up. Once I have your place ready, you'll go home, probably transferred by an ambulance. And I'll need a few things from my place in San Antonio." As Lena listed what needed to be done, Kara's face started to droop.

"Can't I just go home and get the other stuff later?" she asked. "Maybe I don't need all those things."

"I can't lift you, Mrs. Danvers. And I can't carry you. You can't put any, and I mean any, weight on your legs. That means you can't stand up. Until you're plastered into that bed, you can't understand how many things you can't do for yourself. That's where I come in. I'll take care of you, but I'm not Supergirl. I'll need all that equipment, and probably more, to do it. So, it'll be a few days before you can go home, assuming everything goes as it should."

"Hello, dear," Eliza said, opening the door. "Oh, you have company." She smiled politely at Lena and leaned down to kiss Kara's forehead. "Do you want me to come back later, sweetheart?"

"Mom, this is Lena Luthor," Kara said, giving her mother the news to absorb. "Lion Luthor's daughter."

"Oh," Eliza stammered, unsure if she should be surprised or not.

"Hello, Mrs. Danvers," Lena said, shaking her hand.

"Lena's going to be my CSN," Kara added.

"That's nice, dear. But what's a CSN?" Eliza asked, studying Lena up and down for clues.

"I'm a Certified Nursing Assistant, Mrs. Danvers. I'll be taking care of Kara as she recovers."

"Oh, so you'll be taking care of Kara while she's in the specialized nursing unit," she offered.

Lena looked at Kara with raised eyebrows.

"Lena's going to be my in-home caregiver. I'm going to do my recovery at my own house. I'm not going to the specialized nursing unit."

"Now, dear, we talked about this. Remember, the doctor said you'll need around-the-clock care, injections, and rehab. You can't go home just yet, sweetheart." Eliza patted Kara's shoulder as if soothing her. "I know you want to go home, but..."

"I talked to the doctor. He said if I had a qualified nurse, I could go home. And Lena is a qualified nurse. She'll do everything the doctor tells her to do. With her help, I can stay home until the cast comes off and I rehab my legs. I won't have to stay here." Kara seemed fully convinced that this was the right thing to do.

Eliza didn't know what to say. She looked at Lena for verification and at Kara to see if she was serious.

"And insurance will cover most of it. They prefer patients to go home. It costs less than staying in the hospital. But you have to do something for me, Mom."

"Of course, dear. What is it?"

"You need to take Lena to my house to see what kind of hospital equipment we'll need. She can use my upstairs bedroom. I'll use the one downstairs."

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Kara? I mean, I'll be very happy for you to be home, as long as you're getting the best care possible."

"I'll take good care of her, Mrs. Danvers. I promise." Lena provided a reassuring smile. "Patients often recover faster and more easily in their own environments, if that's any consolation to you." Lena touched Eliza's hand.

"Okay, I guess." Eliza seemed concerned but didn't say anything more. Kara was already smiling at the idea that she would be home soon.

"I need to sign some papers and talk to your doctor's nurse. I'll be back later," Lena said, leaving Kara and Eliza to discuss the plans. As soon as Lena left the room and the door closed, Kara pressed the button to call the nurse.

"You can come get this bedpan now," she said when the nurse answered. "My butt is hurting."

Chapter 8

Lena started getting ready for Kara's house move. It required medical prescriptions, equipment rentals, supplies, and a trip to San Antonio so she could pack to stay away from home for two months. If she ever thanked for having a van, taking her clothes, personal items, necessary art materials, and a cat to Kara's house was the moment. She desperately wanted to load her soldering iron and some materials to start working on her projects, but she didn't have space and doubted she had time. She brought some boxes of art supplies to work on her sketches for the sculptures.

Every time Lena stopped at the hospital to talk to Kara or the nurses about her discharge, Kara greeted her with a hopeful expression and the same question. 'Is it time to go home yet?' Lena stopped listing what she had accomplished and what was still left to do. It was easier and faster to just say it. It took three days and a dozen calls to the medical equipment rental company for everything they needed to be set up and working. Kara was ready to bite someone's head off when Lena opened the door to her hospital room on Tuesday morning.

"Good morning," Lena said cheerfully, tossing her bag on the chair and opening the curtains. Light streamed in, filling the room with warm sun.

"Yeah, yeah. It's for some people," Kara grumbled, pulling herself up by the trapeze bar and shifting her weight.

"What's the matter? Aren't you ready to face the day?" Lena asked, looking at her breakfast tray. She refrained from saying that it looked gross.

"See what I mean?" Kara muttered, also looking at the tray.

"What is this supposed to be?"

"I thought I ordered scrambled eggs with ham."

"Oh," Lena murmured, examining what had happened to the eggs on the plate.

Kara slid the wheeled table aside, tired of looking at it.

"Tomorrow I'll order Cheerios," she said, still not satisfied with her position in the bed. She struggled with the bar, shifting and wriggling until she got comfortable.

"Can I help?" Lena asked, adjusting the sheet for Kara.

"Yes, you can. You can finish the planning and paperwork and take me home." Kara was adamant.

"Well, I was going to suggest we move you home today, but if you're set on having Cheerios in the hospital tomorrow, I guess we can wait." Lena was busy stacking and folding towels on the chair.

"Today? Now?" Kara asked, her eyes wild with excitement. "Why didn't you say so? Let's go. Bring my truck to the door and carry me out." Kara sat up and tossed the sheet aside, ready to bolt right that second.

"Hold your horses, Mrs. Danvers," Lena said, putting the sheet back on Kara's lap. "We're waiting for the doctor to sign the prescriptions, and then we'll request the ambulance transfer. It'll take about an hour to get everything set up."

"Hell it will. Call the doctor. Call the ambulance. You can get an ambulance here in three minutes if you dial nine-one-one." Kara was reaching for the phone, struggling against the slings that supported her casts. "I'll dial," she added.

"No, you're not dialing nine-one-one. No, I'm sorry I told you before we finalized the details." She pushed the phone out of reach. "Now, lie down, take a deep breath, and relax. I'll be back in a few minutes." Lena went to the door and looked back at Kara. "Maybe you should eat some of your breakfast. It's good for you." Kara crossed her arms over her chest, pouting and furrowing her brow, and made a face at her."

Kara was about to be tied down when Lena and the nurse entered her room with discharge papers in hand.

"What took so long? You said an hour. It's lunchtime already."

"Are you ready to go home, Mrs. Danvers?" the nurse asked, putting her clipboard on the bedside table.

"I'm ready." Kara tossed the sheet on the chair and raised the head of the bed. "Let's go."

"We need to go over a few things before we release you," the nurse said, flipping through several pages of routine discharge orders.

"Oh no, you don't know. I have a nurse to take care of all this. All I need is to get in the ambulance and head east. Where do I sign?" Kara took the pen from the nurse's hand and grabbed the papers. Lena nodded to the nurse, giving her permission to skip the lengthy explanations and warnings. Kara signed. Lena signed. The nurse signed. And so, Kara was free, finally ready to go home. It had been a week, and she was more than ready. She was beyond eager. If she were a child, it would be Christmas.

"Did you bring something for her to wear?" the nurse asked Lena.

"Yes, I have a shirt and brought a sheet."

"Don't I get clothes?" Kara asked. "Maybe sweats or something?"

Lena and the nurse looked at Kara skeptically.

"There's no way we're getting anything over those casts, Mrs. Danvers," Lena replied, pulling a shirt out of a bag. "I got you an oversized t-shirt that will cover you well. But underwear and sweatpants would just be in the way. They'd be more of a hassle than anything. We'll use sheets or towels as lap covers." Lena knew Kara would demand some modesty, but this was the best she could offer. Kara's privacy would take a back seat to her need for nursing assistance.

Luckily, Kara didn't blush every time she was exposed to the world. It took a few days, but she learned to accept help in and out of the bedpan and with bed baths. She wasn't happy about it, but the alternative was gross. She hadn't wet the bed since she was four, and she wasn't starting now.

"Okay, I can live with a t-shirt then." Kara knew she shouldn't argue about it.

While the nurse went to see what was delaying the ambulance, Lena helped Kara change from the hospital gown into the t-shirt.

"I can get you some of those dresses if you want to wear them. They're easier to manage." Lena pulled the shirt over Kara's head.

"No hospital gowns," Kara responded stiffly, leaving no room for doubt.

Lena couldn't help but notice Kara's breasts were firm and round, her abdomen well-defined from intense field work, with prominent but not excessive biceps.

"Okay, t-shirts it is then." Lena smoothed the shirt down Kara's back and gave her shoulder a pat. "Look at it this way. Think of all the money you'll save on summer clothes this year." She offered a small smile.

"I don't buy summer clothes. I wear jeans and shirts." Kara laughed. "Can you see me wearing short shorts, a crop top, and flip-flops while roping a calf?"

"Hmm, no. Definitely not you."

The attendants got Kara into the back of the ambulance for the trip back home. When they arrived and returned to the porch, Eliza came out to greet Kara and held the door as she entered. As soon as Kara was transferred onto the hospital bed, her mother began hovering, adjusting pillows and sheets while paramedics fastened the trapeze slings to the bedframe. Kara tried to help, but there was little she could do, which frustrated her. She was moved, positioned, fluffed, propped, and covered as if she were a porcelain doll. The ride from the hospital to the house was long and uncomfortable for her. Her legs ached. Her back was sore. She was cranky. And she was tired of being bothered. She wanted to throw a saddle on Coal and go for a ride, the sun warming her face as she galloped through the range. But that wasn't happening. Instead, she was forced to endure the indignity of being dressed in a tiny t-shirt that refused to stay below her waist while a group of strangers organized her life to their liking.

Lena checked her blood pressure and pulse as the paramedics finished positioning Kara on the bed.

"Take a deep breath, please," Lena said as she placed the stethoscope on Kara's chest and listened intently. She checked the position of her legs and adjusted the slings. "Can you wiggle your toes for me?" she asked, feeling the temperature of Kara's toes where they protruded from the end of the cast.

"Hey," Kara winced. "Don't do that."

"What? I'm checking your toes for signs of restricted blood flow. I need to make sure the casts aren't too tight due to swelling." She touched the toes on the other foot.

"I told you, don't do that," Kara snapped, gripping the trapeze bar above her head.

"Are your toes hurting? Do you feel pain when I touch them?" She touched the toes again.

"No, damn it. Stop." Kara said, gritting her teeth.

Lena assumed they'd have one or two minor issues to address, but this simple act of touching her seemed to enrage Kara, something Lena didn't expect.

"I'm sorry, Miss Danvers, but I'll have to get permission to touch you if I'm going to take care of you," Lena replied brusquely.

Eliza smiled at Lena.

"Kara has always had very ticklish feet, dear. She's always been that way." She patted Lena's arm as if to make her point and stop Kara's torture.

"Oh. Sorry." Lena smiled. "So we know you have good circulation, right?"

"My circulation's fine, thank you. Now leave my feet alone." Kara held on tightly to the bar and glanced sideways at Lena until she moved away from the foot of the bed.

"I'll remember that," Lena replied as she made notes on a clipboard. "Alright," she said, setting the clipboard aside. "I need to check for pressure sores."

"I don't have any."

"I didn't say you do. But I have to check and provide proof that you were handed off to home care without any. The paramedics will witness my findings."

"Great," Kara scoffed.

"Can you lift with the bar so I can see your back?"

Kara complied, holding onto it as she swung her legs off the bed for Lena to examine.

"Good. You can lie down now. I need to check your bottom."

"Why?"

"Because I want to," Lena replied with the same tenacity Kara exhibited.

"My bottom is fine. If I had sores, the nurse who bathed me this morning would have said something."

"I have to look anyway." Lena put her hands under Kara's hips, ready to roll when Kara was ready to cooperate.

"I'm tired. I need a nap," Kara responded, pulling the sheet up over her shoulders.

"That's fine. You'll be able to take a nap in just a few minutes, Miss Danvers. But first, I need to check your bottom. Now please roll to your side for me." Lena kept her hands under Kara's hip, ready to assist.

"Come on, honey," Eliza said, trying to offer assistance. "You can do it. We'll help you."

"Why not?" Kara taunted. "My privacy has gone to hell anyway." She grabbed the bed rail and rolled to her side, exposing her bottom for examination. "Go ahead, folks."

"Thank you. You can turn back now," Lena replied.

"Are you sure you don't want to take pictures for posterity?" Kara asked, still holding onto the side.

"No. That won't be necessary. You don't have sores. But believe me, Miss Danvers, if you did, I'd be documenting them with photographs." Lena helped her onto her back.

"You're not taking pictures of my butt."

"I'm also not taking blame for someone else's negligent nursing care." Lena signed the release form and thanked the paramedics for their help, then escorted them to the back door.

"Good luck, miss," one of the paramedics said, chuckling softly. He cast a glance at the room. "You're gonna need it," he whispered.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Lena said, ignoring his comment.

When she returned to the room, Eliza was circling the bed, folding the sheet and rearranging the medical equipment as if they were pieces of furniture out of place. Lena smiled to herself and didn't say anything. She knew Eliza was just trying to help. She didn't realize that the lift needed to be accessed in the middle of the bed, not the farthest corner of the room. And the dresser didn't need to be by the bathroom door. It would only serve its purpose when Kara could get out of bed with assistance, and that would take a few days.

"Mom, can you stop fussing?" Kara said as her mother made her second trip around the bed, folding and straightening.

"I want to help, dear. Miss Luthor can't do everything."

"Please call me Lena, Mrs. Danvers," Lena said warmly. "And I'm capable of doing everything Kara needs. You can count on that."

"And you should call me Eliza," she replied, smiling at Lena. "I know you can, Lena. I never doubted it for a minute. Do you think I'd leave my baby with you if I didn't think she's in good hands?" Eliza tapped Kara's cheek and ran her fingers through her hair again.

"Mom, go home. I'm settled in. Your job here is done. I bet you've been cleaning and straightening things since the sun came up. You need to go home and rest." Kara squeezed her mother's hand. "Call me later, and I'll tell you what kind of pie you can make for me."

"How did you know I was going to make a pie for you? Did your father tell you?" Eliza frowned, annoyed her secret was revealed.

"Nobody, Mom. Nobody told me, but what did you do when Lexie broke her arm last year? And what did you do when J'onn's granddaughter had her appendix out last month? Face it, Mom. You bake pies instead of sending cards. You could single-handedly put Hallmark out of business."

"Well, I'm sort of determined not to make one for you," she pondered, feigning anger.

"Pecan, Mom. Or chocolate cream. Your choice." Kara winked at her mother.

It was the first time Lena saw Kara's playful side, and she noticed it brought a twinkle to her eyes and a smile that could light up the whole house.

"Oh, pecan. That sounds good. I bet your father would like one too." Eliza grabbed her purse and headed for the door, struggling with the decision of which pie to make. "Do you like pecan pie, Lena?" she asked from the doorway.

"You don't need to do anything for me, Mrs. Danvers, but thank you."

"It's Eliza, and do you like pecan pie, dear?" she asked in a serious tone.

"You better answer, or she'll never leave," Kara chimed in.

"Yes, ma'am. I love pecan pie," Lena replied.

"And banana cream?" Eliza added.

"Hmm," Lena hesitated, not wanting to sound ungrateful.

"Coconut cream?"

"Yes, coconut cream." Lena smiled broadly.

"I'll ask J'onn to deliver two pies in the morning," she called out as she left, slamming the screen door behind her.

"Thank you, Mrs. Danvers," Lena called after her. "Eliza," she corrected.

"She'll make all three. You watch," Kara declared, gripping the bar and shifting her weight.

"Why would she make three pies for the two of us?"

"Because that's what she can do. She can't help taking care of me. Her back won't allow it. She's had two surgeries. But baking is something she can still do. So when she wants to help someone, she cooks. When my cousin accidentally shot himself in the foot last year, she sent a four-course meal home and then made his favorite dessert every day for a week. He gained five pounds."

"I can understand her wanting to help and making pies, but three?"

"She'll have half of each one wrapped in aluminum foil. You'll see." Kara sighed and stretched her shoulders.

"Are you stiff?" Lena asked, noticing her grimace.

"No, I'm fine."

"Uh-huh." Lena was looking at the doctor's orders. "I know I'd be stiff if I were lying with my legs in casts."

"I'm fine, Ms. Luthor. Don't patronize me."

"I'm not patronizing you. I was just suggesting it's not uncommon for someone in your situation to feel confined and stiff."

"My situation? You mean trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey?"

Lena laughed and continued reading the papers.

"By the way, please call me Lena. According to these orders, you missed your LMWH this morning."

"What the hell is LMWH?" Kara asked.

"LMWH," Lena corrected while going through the papers. "Low-molecular-weight heparin."

"You mean the shot?"

"Yes," Lena replied, looking at Kara to see how that would be taken.

"Maybe the doctor decided I don't need it. I'm perfectly healthy."

"It's not about being healthy. It's about preventing blood clots, especially in the leg you had surgery on. Inactivity makes you a prime candidate for that sort of thing. Here," she pointed to the note on the page. "They thought you'd be home by noon and I was supposed to give you the injection as soon as you settled in. I'll be right back."

"Oh, man," Kara groaned. "Can't wait."

Lena returned with a small plastic tray, an alcohol swab, and a pre-filled disposable syringe. She went to the bathroom, washed her hands, and put on a pair of disposable gloves.

"This works best when injected into the fatty tissue of the abdomen," Lena said, opening the swab.

Kara had already lifted her shirt. There were several punctures on her abdomen.

"Keep in mind, I'm evaluating the nurses who stab me," Kara advised, watching Lena set things up. "So far, I've had a javelin thrower, an ice fisherman, and several dart throwers." She tilted her head back and waited.

Lena cleaned the area and administered the injection with a swift, sure motion.

"Ow," Kara yelped, flexing her muscles.

"Don't tense up like that."

"Let me stab you with an ice auger and see if you stay loose," Kara scowled as she lowered her shirt and rubbed her stomach.

"Are we going to have this every time I need to give you an injection?" Lena asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Yes, we are, especially if you're planning for the needle to come out the back of my shirt."

"Miss Danvers, are you a big baby?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not a big baby. But you stab, I complain."

Lena tossed the syringe and gloves in the trash while rolling her eyes at Kara.

"Well, at least we got you home without complaining," Lena muttered as she headed to the kitchen to prepare lunch.

Chapter 9



Eliza used to visit or call every day, bringing something to help. Sometimes it was a pie, sometimes a salad, sometimes a tray of artistically arranged condiments, filled with the healthy things Lena said Kara should eat. Lexie checked on Coal and the heifers that Kara had in her corral. Jeremiah came to keep Kara updated on ranch news and issues. Lena knew he wanted to comment on how much easier it was without Lion's vandalism, but she was grateful that Jeremiah showed restraint. He asked how Lion was at the care facility, and Lena presumed he was genuinely interested. But since the facility asked her to give her father some time to adjust, she didn't have much to offer. As far as Lena knew, Lion was eating well, socializing with the other residents, and not causing trouble for the staff. So, she was thankful. She was looking forward to visiting him, hoping they could have a good conversation, even if it was brief. Lion wasn't much for small talk, but she was eager to show him the sketches she had been working on and hoped he'd show some interest in her work.

Kara was happy to be home, but being stuck in a bed wasn't what she had in mind for regaining her freedom. Dr. Potter was right. Moody was an accurate description of Kara. Some days she was more irritable than grumpy. Lena had set up a portable TV in the room, but Kara spent most of the day flipping through the channels, mocking the ridiculous daytime choices to watch.

Lena prepared a chef's salad for lunch, encouraging Kara to eat balanced vegetables and proteins, something the doctor insisted she do.

"You need to eat all your veggies," Lena said, going to fetch Kara's tray. "The doctor was quite adamant about it. Your body can't heal properly if you don't eat well."

Kara picked up a carrot from the bowl and took a bite.

"Okay. I did it," she said, returning to flipping through the channels.

"You didn't even finish half of your lunch."

"I also didn't do anything to work up an appetite. It's not very strenuous just lying here."

"But—" Lena began.

"I don't want to." Kara shot a determined look.

"Okay." Lena didn't want to argue about it. "Do you need anything for pain?"

"No." Kara kept her attention on the screen.

"Call me if you need anything." Lena took the tray to the kitchen.

In a few minutes, Kara had dozed off, still holding the remote control. Her body still required an occasional nap, something Kara rarely indulged in during her busy days. When Lena came to check on her, she gently removed the remote from her hand and pulled the sheet over her shoulders. It was warm outside, but with the air conditioning on indoors, she didn't want Kara to get cold.

She went back to meal planning for the week and checking what she would need from the grocery store. Eliza offered to do the shopping for her since she had to go to the store herself. The freezer was filled with beef, undoubtedly prime, aged, and tender, but Lena intended to add chicken, fish, and other healthy options to the menu. She wasn't a gourmet chef, but she knew her way around creating creative and tasty meals without breaking the budget. Lena also noticed that the fridge was filled with soda and even some beer. Lena was just waiting for Kara to demand a beer with her lunch. The doctor had said no alcohol and limited amounts of soda. Plenty of milk, water, and fruit juice were his recommendations. Lena had a feeling that this would be an issue.

Lena had gone upstairs to put away a load of laundry when she heard a shout and a curse from Kara. She hurried downstairs and entered her room.

"What's wrong?" Lena exclaimed, her eyes wide as saucers. "Are you okay?"

"What is this?" Kara demanded, looking at the black, furry lump lying in the valley between her knees.

Lena came over to the bed and looked.

"Picasso, what are you doing here?" Lena stroked the black cat and picked him up, cuddling him lovingly. "You're supposed to stay in my room."

"You brought your cat?" Kara grumbled, eyeing the animal.

"Yes," Lena held the cat in her arms like a baby, scratching his belly.

"Don't you think you should've asked first? I don't like cats."

"I did ask. If you remember, I asked if you had any allergies or objected to domesticated animals," Lena replied, refreshing Kara's memory.

"I don't remember that."

"I certainly did. It was the day we discussed where to put the hospital bed. And you said as long as you didn't have to take care of them, you didn't mind the animals I had, as long as it wasn't a skunk."

"Cats are spoiled. I don't like them. You can't train them to do anything."

"You can train them too." Picasso was purring so loudly that Lena had to raise her voice to be heard. "Picasso can do a trick."

"What?"

"Well, it's not really a trick. But he sleeps in sunspots," Lena announced.

"Sunspots?"

"Yes, you know. When the sun shines through the blinds or curtains and makes a spot on the floor,

he sleeps in them. That's probably why he was on your bed. Do you see the light coming in through the window?"

"Well, untrain him."

"I'll put him in the mudroom."

"Why not put him outside? That's where cats belong."

"I would, but this house is new to him, so I'll let him get used to it first. I don't want him to run off and get lost." Lena walked out the door with the cat.

"That would be a shame," Kara muttered sarcastically.

"I heard that. He won't be any trouble. He's never had accidents in the house, and he's fixed, so he's always a gentleman. And I couldn't leave him alone in San Antonio, could I?"

"Is this the only domesticated animal you have?"

"Yes. Picasso is a black Persian. You won't even know he's here."

"Too late. I already know," Kara muttered to herself, trying to go back to sleep.

It took a few days for Lena and Kara to settle into a routine and get used to each other. Kara struggled to ask for bedpan assistance, but Lena assured her it was part of life and not a big deal. Embarrassing Kara was the last thing Lena wanted to do. After several days of boredom, Kara started looking for things she could do in the confinement of her bed. She polished her boots, fixed the toaster, helped peel potatoes, balanced the checkbook, read about the history of Appaloosa horses, tinkered on the laptop, made lists of things she'd do the minute the casts were off, and insisted on why she couldn't get out of bed yet.

Finally, the doctor approved orders allowing her to be out of bed and in a wheelchair for a few hours. With the help of the lift, Lena managed to transfer Kara to the wheelchair for rides around the living room and dining room, her plaster-covered legs projecting like cannons on a colonial frigate. The first thing Kara wanted to see was the corral and Coal. She settled for watching him from the window as he pranced around the corral. The wheelchair wasn't as comfortable as being in bed, but Kara didn't dare complain about it, fearing that bit of freedom might be taken away.

"If we took the lift to the living room, could I not spend part of the day on the couch instead of the bed?" Kara asked, rolling around the room.

"We can try, but only if I give you enough support. We don't want any pressure on your legs. I can pile up a bunch of pillows under the cast."

"I can't spend all my time in that bed," Kara explained, not doing a great job at hiding her growing frustration.

Lena understood how hard it was for Kara to spend hours and hours in a hospital bed staring at the ceiling.

"Just a minute. Let me move the furniture so I can get the lift here, then I'll help you onto the couch."

Kara moved the wheelchair out of the way and watched Lena rearrange the furniture. It irked her not being able to help. She had never had to rely on someone else to lift and move her. She was a

self-sufficient woman who could do it for herself, until now. She wanted out of the bed, but she didn't want to make it hard work for Lena. For a brief moment, she wished she hadn't mentioned it.

"Okay, let's give this a try," Lena said.

"I'm ready." Kara removed the armrests and tossed them aside, eager for this to happen. Lena maneuvered the lift into position and transferred her from the wheelchair to the couch. With carefully positioned pillows supporting her head, back, and the bulky casts, Kara settled into the cushions.

"Do you need anything? Are you comfortable?"

"I'm fine. No, wait. Could you bring me the green bag hanging on the hook in the bathroom, please? It's the one with the horse on it." Kara asked as she adjusted the pillow behind her head.

"Sure," Lena replied, moving the lift out of the way. She returned with the bag and placed it on the floor next to the couch. "Here's the remote control," she added, placing it on Kara's lap. "Call me if you need anything." Lena headed for the kitchen, leaving Kara in her new spot.

Kara was already rummaging through the bag, her eyes bright and eager as she pulled out a coiled leather lariat. It was dirty and well-worn, but she was excited to feel it in her hands. She adjusted the lariat and was tempted to loop it over her head, but realized the lamp and flower vase Lena had placed on the table would be in her line of fire. She flipped the lariat over her feet, playfully twirling it, first lassoing one foot then the other. Picasso came to watch. He hopped onto the coffee table and squatted, inspecting each toss and deciding whether to pounce on the rope.

"Hey, Angus. Maybe you could run around the room, and I could practice lassoing you," Kara said, looking at the cat.

"I don't think so," Lena said with a scowl, returning to the room with Kara's blood pressure monitor and chart. "Do we need that old smelly rope in the living room? I'm pretty sure it's not hygienic," Lena said, shooing Picasso away from the table.

"Old smelly rope?" Kara replied with consternation. "This isn't an old smelly rope. This is a hand-braided leather lariat made in Brazil. This old rope is worth more than this couch."

"Good for it," Lena stated, unwrapping the cuff.

"Do you know how they're made, Mrs. Luthor?"

"No." She held Kara's arm under hers and fastened the Velcro around her bicep.

"It takes weeks to make one. They have to cut and stretch the leather strips, braid and stretch again. After all that, they bury it for a few weeks to age the leather. Then it's stretched one last time. This is a work of art. It's crafted by masters. You should appreciate it," Kara added as Lena hooked the stethoscope in her ears and pumped the cuff.

"Shh," Lena said, listening intently.

"What's the problem? I thought you liked Western art," Kara argued.

"Quiet. I'm trying to get a reading. If you don't stop talking, I can't hear." She frowned at Kara and took her blood pressure again.

"Okay," Kara replied and let out a sigh. "I don't need to take my blood pressure every two seconds

anyway," she muttered.

Lena scowled at her and continued pumping the bulb, tightening the cuff even more.

"Ow," Kara exclaimed.

"Now are you going to be quiet?"

Kara closed her eyes in surrender. When Lena finished taking her blood pressure, she measured her pulse and temperature and noted her breathing. She recorded the vital signs on the chart, then checked the color and mobility of Kara's toe fingers.

"There. All done," Lena said. "Now you can talk."

"I've got nothing to say," Kara grumbled, pushing her arms on the couch to sit up.

"Here. Let me help you," Lena said, coming to her side.

"I can do this," Kara groaned as she slid her butt back to the end of the couch.

"I know you can, but..." Lena's arms were open and ready to offer assistance. Kara's hand suddenly slipped off the couch. Lena caught it just as it was about to hit the floor. "I've got you," she said reassuringly. Kara grabbed Lena's shoulders for support. Lena wrapped her arms around Kara and pushed her back onto the couch. "Are you okay?" she asked anxiously.

"My leg is slipping, and I can't stop it," Kara said, frantically grabbing onto the cast.

"I got it. I got it." Lena held her leg as it was about to hit the floor. She cradled it in her arms and gently placed it back on the pillow. "There. All set," she said through a relieved sigh. "Now, when I say let me help, maybe you'll listen."

Kara didn't say anything. She didn't want to admit that she couldn't even do the simplest task on her own.

"We need one of those bed rails they put on the side of the bed for kids. The ones that keep them from rolling out at night." Lena was chatting and adjusting the pillows under Kara's legs. She didn't notice Kara's scowl. "They slide right under the mattress," Lena continued. She looked at Kara and saw her scowl. "What? Are you okay?"

"I'm not a child. I don't need to be prevented from rolling out of bed." Kara looked at her angrily. "I just lost my balance. I could've caught myself."

"You would've fallen to the floor if I hadn't caught you," Lena retorted, looking back at her. "Your stubborn pride is going to put you back in the hospital if you don't give in and let me help you. That's what I'm here for. If you fall and loosen those screws, you'll be back in surgery and another week in the hospital before you know it." Lena stood up and put her hands on her hips. "And I have news for you, Mrs. Danvers. This is my job, and I know the ambulance department's phone number. I'm telling you right now, even if you breathe funny, I'm on the phone with them. So don't push it."

"I'm not a child," Kara repeated. She knew Lena was right.

As a hired nurse's aide, she was in total control, and that left Kara furious. She might have to give in to her, but she certainly didn't have to like it.

"Okay, you're not a child. Sorry." Lena packed up the chart and supplies. "Do you want apple juice or milk?" Lena asked, repacking the equipment in the bag.

"Neither. How about a—"

"Don't say Coke," Lena cut her off. "You need some nutrition, not that."

Kara frowned and crossed her arms. "What makes you think I was going to say that?"

Lena gave a wry smile and headed to the kitchen.

"Juice?" she repeated.

"NO."

"As you wish."

"Iced tea," Kara called out.

A minute later, Lena returned with a cold glass and handed it to Kara. There was a sprig of mint and a lemon slice on the rim of the glass. Kara took a long sip and immediately frowned at Lena.

"Hey, this isn't iced tea. It's apple juice." She made a disgusted face.

"It won't kill you." Lena went back to the kitchen.

"I still prefer iced tea."

"Water is better for you than all that caffeine," Lena replied without looking back.

"How about a cold beer for lunch?"

"In a few months, you can have one," Lena shot over her shoulder and kept walking.

"You can't forget you're a nurse for a minute? What about patient sympathy?"

Lena turned around and went back to the couch. She looked at Kara authoritatively.

"Letting you have soda, beer, and junk food isn't sympathy. I don't care what you eat or drink, Miss Danvers. When your legs are healed, you can have beer and chips for breakfast. But as long as I'm responsible for your recovery, you'll eat what the doctor recommends and drink what I provide. Alcohol doesn't mix with your medication, and your bones won't heal properly without proper vitamins and protein in your diet. But I guess you already knew that. If you don't like it, the phone is behind you, and the number for the specialized nursing unit is on the pad. And I'm sure they have a nice room for you with a lovely view of the picnic table. Now shut up and drink your apple juice."

Lena took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and went back to the kitchen. Kara raised her eyebrows but didn't say anything. She knew she had been scolded. She took another sip of the glass, momentarily forgetting it was juice. She grimaced, but the taste wasn't as bad as she thought it would be. She took another sip.

"I guess a fifth of Jack Daniels is out of the question?" Kara yelled, trying to get out the last word.

The kitchen door closed.

"I guess it is," she muttered, taking a long gulp of juice.

A minute later, the kitchen door opened again.

"You've got company coming up the road," Lena announced.

"Who?"

"It's a white pickup truck with chrome rails."

"Dad," Kara said.

"Someone's with him."

"Mom?"

"I don't think so. I can see two hats in the car," Lena replied. She went to the dining room window and watched as the truck pulled up to the back porch. "It's Lexie."

"She's probably checking on the heifers." Kara tried to see through the window, but she had no view from the couch.

"Your dad's carrying a box of ledger books." Lena went to the back door to greet them.

"Good." Kara sat up as straight as she could and held the sheet over her lap, eager to do some work on the ranch, even if it was from a reclined position. "Hey, Dad," she said cheerfully. "What's up?"

"Feel like going over some figures with me?" Jeremiah placed the box on the coffee table and tossed his hat onto the chair.

"You bet. Let's see what you've got," Kara replied, picking up one of the books from the box.

"A-One and T-bone are up from last year's numbers. Tolerance and Viking have bred really well, but Shiloh and Captain Jack are down, especially Jack." He pulled out a chair and looked over Kara's shoulder as she reviewed the columns of numbers.

"If he's not producing, we can't keep him out there." Kara and Jeremiah were engrossed in ranch talk. Lena had heard some things before, but she didn't understand. Lion had never really explained much about the cattle business to her, saying it was men's work. Lena made a glass of iced tea for Jeremiah, then made one for Lexie and headed toward the corral.

"Lexie, how about some iced tea?" Lena called out, holding the glass over the fence.

"Sure," Lexie replied, wiping a gloved hand across her forehead. She gulped down the glass and handed it back. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Lena watched as Lexie walked among the cows, her belly wide with calf. "What are you looking for?"

"These eight haven't had their first calves yet. They're a little late, so we want to keep an eye on them. Hey, there's a new one." Lexie smiled as she looked toward the open shed on the other side of the paddock. In the back corner of the shed, shielded by its mother, a wobbly-legged black calf was nursing from its mother's swollen teat. The calf was still wet and shiny from birth. Lexie squatted down and peeked into the shed, not wanting to get too close and scare the baby during its first meal.

"Where?" Lena asked, trying to see.

"In the back," Lexie said, pointing among the cows. "Come to this side."

Lena went to the other side of the corral and tried to see the shed.

"Oh, Lexie, look at her. Isn't she cute?" Lena leaned her arms on the fence and watched as the baby balanced on its new legs and nursed.

"That's not a her. It's a him, a bull calf, and he's not cute. He's the best Black Angus steak. That little guy is money in the bank." Lexie's critical eye was assessing the calf's quality and weight.

"Well, he might be, but he's still cute," Lena joked, warmly smiling at the baby.

"Don't let Kara hear you say that. She says they're not cute, they're just mini steak burgers." Lexie laughed.

"You and Kara need to learn to soften up. Baby animals are all cute."

"Not all of them. Baby rattlesnakes are still rattlesnakes."

"True," Lena agreed, wrinkling her nose.

"Maybe we'll have a few more of these heifers calving tomorrow."

"Please don't ask me to help bring the cows," Lena reflected. "Taking care of Kara is enough."

"I bet you're right. She's not exactly cooperating, is she?"

Lena just smiled.

"Kara's not very good at sitting on the sidelines," Lexie added with a wry grin. "Telling her she can't do something will make her angrier than a bull with two straps."

"I've noticed that."

"And is she giving you the business?"

"Actually, yes. She's just having a little trouble accepting she can't do everything she wants right now." Lena wondered how much Lexie really knew about Kara.

"Hang in there," Lexie said, putting her hat back on her head. She looked at Lena. "Kara struggles with asking for help. She's just scared."

"Scared of what?" Lena asked skeptically. "I think this woman isn't afraid of anything."

"She's scared of losing control."

"Ah, I'll keep that in mind."

"I think she trusts you. She wouldn't let you take care of her if she didn't."

"Sometimes I'm not so sure," Lena admitted cautiously.

"Give me a call if she gives you any trouble," Lexie added, stepping through the gate and locking it behind her.

"So, she'll listen to you?" Lena asked.

"No. But maybe we can both corral her." Lexie patted Lena's back, offering support for the task ahead.

"All set, Lexie?" Jeremiah called, loading the box into the truck.

"Yes," she replied, climbing into the cab.

"Give me a ring if you need anything, Lena," Jeremiah said, his eyes full of concern for his daughter. He shook Lena's hand, then slid into the truck and tapped the door.

"Thank you," Lena said, smiling at them. "Kara will be fine, seriously. Don't worry about her. I'll take good care of her."

Jeremiah doffed his hat, a gesture Lena interpreted as his trust in her ability. Lexie did the same, adding a small smile.

"Remember what I told you, Lena," Lexie said.

Lena nodded and stepped inside. She couldn't decide if Lexie's advice shed new light on Kara's rough behavior and impulsive language, but Lexie had Kara pegged pretty well. She was definitely a woman who didn't like asking for help.

The next morning, like every morning, Lena brought in a basin of water for Kara to wash up. Lena washed her back, but Kara insisted she could do the rest. She was tired of feeling like a piece of glass. She was also tired of having to ask Lena for everything she needed, from a glass of water to using the toilet.

"Since I can't stand up and in the wheelchair part of the time, I want to take my own shower," Kara announced.

"You do, mostly." Lena checked the water temperature and set out a clean towel and washcloth on the edge of the bed.

"No. I want to go to the bathroom and take a shower."

"You know you can't get the cast wet."

"But I could sit in the wheelchair and wash myself. I could even turn on the hot water and brush my teeth at the sink instead of spitting into a cup. This bed bath routine is getting old."

"Alright, we can do that." Lena saw no reason why Kara couldn't at least use the sink. Picasso walked into Kara's room and settled on the floor, washing his face.

"Too bad I can't just wash up like Angus does," Kara reflected.

"His name is Picasso, and yes, that would be a trick, I suppose."

Lena shooed Picasso toward the door with her foot. "You go outside and leave Kara alone," she said, giving him a stern look. Instead of leaving the room, the cat wove through Lena's legs and leaped onto the bed before she could stop him. He dipped his nose into the basin of water, giving it a tentative lick.

"Picasso, get down," Lena scolded.

"You don't give him anything to drink?" Kara asked, watching the cat lap up the lukewarm water.

"He has a water dish in the bathroom next to his food."

Kara grabbed Lena's hand to stop her from shooing him away.

"He's thirsty. Leave him be," she demanded. "I bet his water dish is empty."

"I just filled it."

"Is it cold water? Some animals don't like cold water."

"Picasso has never turned up his nose at cold tap water before." Lena propped her hand on her hip.

"He's just curious. He's also a bit stubborn, like a certain someone else I could mention. Picasso knows he's not supposed to be in here."

"I bet he drinks toilet water," Kara said, watching the cat as he continued to occasionally lap at the basin.

"That's disgusting." Lena wrinkled her nose. "My cat doesn't drink toilet water. What do you think toilet seat lids are for?"

"That's enough, Angus. You'll bloat." Kara wagged her finger in the water, splashing a few drops onto the cat's face.

"His name is not Angus. It's Picasso."

"He doesn't look like a Picasso. He looks like a Black Angus."

"He has long hair," Lena argued. "Angus cattle have short hair."

"Pablo Picasso was bald."

"Only when he got older." Lena was surprised that Kara knew anything about Pablo Picasso.

The cat gingerly made its way along the bed, sniffing and inspecting Kara's casts. He leaped over a leg and settled between her feet, continuing his bath. Kara didn't let Lena shoo him away, saying she wanted to see who would finish the bath first, the cat with his rough tongue or Kara with her rough towel. It was a tie. As soon as Kara finished washing and rinsing, the cat stopped too. He curled up into a ball and prepared for a nap.

"Tomorrow, we'll try using the sink for your bath, if you still want to," Lena advised, coming to take the basin of water away. "I'll be back to get Picasso in a minute."

"No. Leave him. Give me something to aggravate."

"Leave him be, or there won't be wheelchair time for you." Lena smiled at Kara, content that she had at least accepted the cat and was ready for some good-natured teasing.

The next morning, Lena positioned Kara's wheelchair next to the sink just as she wanted.

"Do you need any help?" Lena asked, turning on a stream of water and testing the temperature.

"I've got this," Kara replied, lifting her arms off the wheelchair. She had accepted help from the hospital nurses, her mother, and Lena to do even the simplest tasks. Today she was going to wash up in her own bathroom. It was a small victory for independence, but still a victory. "You can go have a cup of coffee or read the newspaper or something. I've got this." She waved Lena away.

"Are you sure?" Lena looked like a mother bird worried her fledgling would fall out of the nest on its first flight. "I can sit on the edge of the tub in case you need me."

"No, I've got this. Where's my toothpaste?"

"Right here." Lena placed it beside the toothbrush. "Here's a cup if you need it," she added, adjusting everything to the perfect position. "Anything else?"

Kara rolled back and held the door open.

"Yeah, you. Out."

Kara pointed and closed the door after Lena reluctantly left. In just a few minutes, Lena was back at the door, knocking softly.

"How's it going? Anything I can do? Do you need me to wash your back?"

"No." Kara had washed her arms and face and was working on her chest. She was dripping all over the floor, splashing soapy water everywhere from the mirror to the ceiling, but she was doing it on her own. She was humming "The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You" as she washed her groin and then each side of her butt, leaning from side to side, her heavy casts making it difficult to reach. She dipped the towel into the sink and wrung it out, then used it like a wet rope to wash her back, pulling it back and forth. She finished brushing her teeth and combing her hair. She pulled a clean shirt over her head and draped a clean towel over her lap for modesty before putting the armrests back on. Her arms were heavy, and she was tired from the bath, but she was also proud of her newfound independence. She rolled to the door and opened it to find Lena waiting just outside.

"How was it?" Lena asked, maneuvering the wheelchair out of the bathroom.

"Good. There's nothing to this bathing thing," Kara replied proudly.

"Uh-huh," Lena said, noticing the wet floor and the pile of soggy towels in the corner. "I can see that."

"I can pretty much take care of myself, don't you think?" Kara looked deadly serious, like a kid who had just been through a sprinkler on a hot summer day and thought she was ready to join the Olympic swimming team.

"Alright, Supergirl. It's time for your chair time," Lena said, smiling to herself.

Chapter 10

A week went by and Kara was still struggling with the couch cushions and pillows to find a comfortable position. Either her body had grown two inches longer or the couch was shrinking. She used to find a perfect fit before, sinking into it after a hard day of work. But since she broke her legs, nothing felt comfortable anymore. The casts refused to give in even an inch, so she had to settle for a dull ache in her stiff legs, a backache, and a perpetual longing to scratch an itch deep beneath the cast.

"Here, watch something educational," Lena teased, handing Kara the remote control after she settled onto the couch.

"Oh, great. I've arrived just in time to watch Sesame Street," Kara rolled her eyes.

"Would you like some milk and cookies while watching Sesame Street?" Lena asked as she headed to the kitchen.

"If I watch Yellowstone reruns, do I get a whiskey shot?"

Lena just shook her head. The front doorbell rang, telling Kara, whoever it was, they didn't know they should come in through the back door. No one used the front door. Why it was even put there, no one knows. It was on the opposite side of the house from the garage entrance, the barn, the kitchen, and anything else Kara deemed important. The only thing the front door had going for it was the massive poplar tree that shaded it nearly year-round.

"I'll get it," Kara said sarcastically.

"Very funny," Lena joked, going to answer. She unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door, her eyes widening. Kara couldn't see who it was, but she could see Lena's smile. "Hello, Sydney. What are you doing here?"

"Hey there, cutie. What's cooking?" The voice was strong and deep for a woman.

"I got your message. I'm heading back home after the conference in El Paso, so I thought I'd swing by here and see if you need some company. You're certainly on the way." Sydney laughed. "Is this on the map?"

"Come in," Lena said, holding the door for her. "Come meet Kara," she added, noticing Kara peering over the back of the couch.

"Hey, Kara," Sydney called, waving to her. Kara instantly recognized her as the woman who accompanied Lena to Rainbow Desert.

Lena led the way into the living room where Kara extended her hand to Sydney. Sydney shook it with a firm, dominant grip, something Kara normally wasn't subjected to.

"Wow, what happened, Kara? Did a horse shoot you or something?"

"Trailer accident," Kara offered, but Sydney had already shifted her attention back to Lena.

"How long are you staying out in the middle of nowhere?" Sydney asked, giving a quick look around the room, noting the rustic cattle decor and leather furniture.

"I'm Kara's nurse while she recovers."

"Are you actually living here?" Sydney asked in a softer but critical tone.

"Kara needs round-the-clock care. She can't do much without help."

"Sure, I get it. But do you get time off for good behavior? You know, a night off every now and then," she asked, winking at Lena.

"I'm her caregiver, Sydney," Lena replied in a low but firm voice. "Come on up. I'll show you some sketches I'm working on for the project in Merrill. Going with a historical theme." Lena took Sydney by the arm and led her upstairs.

"Historical?" Sydney asked, looping her arm around Lena's shoulder. "That sounds great."

Kara watched until they disappeared. She leaned as far as she could without falling off the couch. She muted the TV, straining to hear the conversation from Lena's room, but the voices grew too faint to make out. She cleared her throat loudly, but it had no effect on the women or their upstairs rendezvous. Kara's curiosity was killing her. She never considered herself the jealous type. After all, it wasn't her place to feel jealous. Lena was just her nurse. Besides, what was there to be jealous of? Sydney's eyes were too deep, and her lips were too full. She also didn't have much shape, which Kara noticed right away. No, no boobs to speak of, she thought. What Lena saw in her was a mystery. But Kara wasn't jealous. She was just curious. She was curious how someone could take a beautiful woman like Lena to a club and never dance with her. How could she sit next to Lena, an intelligent and vibrant woman, and spend the whole time talking to people across the table? That night, Kara couldn't take her eyes off Lena, and she didn't even know her name.

Kara could hear their voices growing louder as they descended the stairs.

"Would you like something to drink? Iced tea? Lemonade?" Lena asked, leading Sydney into the living room.

"Sure. Iced tea, two sugars." Sydney was still laughing at whatever they were discussing upstairs.

"And you, Kara? Juice?" Lena inquired.

"Iced tea," Kara said, testing to see if Lena would indulge her. She didn't want to be treated like a child in front of this woman, and getting apple juice would only emphasize that.

"Alright," Lena replied after a slight hesitation. "Sugar?"

"No." Kara had no idea why she said no. She always put sugar in tea and coffee and anything else that could support it. Just because Sydney had sugar didn't mean she couldn't.

"Why don't you keep Kara company while I do that?" Lena said.

"Come on, Sydney," Kara declared with a sarcastic cadence in her voice. "Sit. Take a load off."

"I know it sounds funny, but you sure do look familiar. Have I seen you somewhere before?" Sydney asked, studying Kara.

"I don't think so." Kara wasn't about to admit she was the woman causing a stir at Rainbow Desert. "Do you live in San Antonio?" Kara asked, determined to steer the conversation in a new direction.

"Yeah."

"What do you do in San Antonio?"

"I own an inn."

"Wow, a B&B. That sounds interesting. Which part of the city?"

"King William historic district."

"Nice area. Do you venture down to the Riverwalk?"

"No. We're across the street from the Riverwalk."

"We?" Kara asked.

"I have a business partner. She and I are co-owners."

"So she runs it and you escape?" Kara couldn't help the chatty comment.

"I've been in El Paso for an innkeepers' conference."

"Here we are," Lena said, carrying a tray of glasses into the living room. Kara and Sydney both reached for magazines to clear the coffee table at the same time, tugging them in opposite directions. Kara won, tossing them under the table. She patted the table for Lena to set the tray. Lena handed Sydney a glass and a napkin, then handed one to Kara with a straw. She draped a towel over Kara's chest to catch the drips, a gesture Kara immediately disliked. As Kara tipped the glass to sip from the straw, it slid down her neck and dripped onto the towel.

"Would you like to sit down for a while?" Lena asked, wiping up the spill.

"Yeah, I think so. Here, you hold this. I'll do this." Kara handed the glass to Lena and planted her fists into the couch to push herself up.

"Wait. Let me help you," Lena said, placing the glass on the tray.

"I can do this," Kara insisted.

Lena stood at the end of the couch and locked her arms under Kara's armpits, ready to pull her back against the end.

"Let me do this, Lena," Sydney said, springing up. "She's too heavy for you."

Kara looked at Sydney, the venom in her eyes hard to conceal. Sydney pushed Lena aside and assumed the same position, gripping Kara under the arms and effortlessly pulling her back.

"There you go, Kara. All set," Sydney said, giving her a pat on the head.

"I could have done that," Kara muttered. "I'm not completely helpless. Us folks out here in the boonies can handle a few things ourselves."

Lena merely smiled and handed Kara her glass, then readjusted the towel on her lap, only worsening Kara's embarrassment. She was reduced to being placed on the couch and wearing a bib while sipping through a straw. Kara drank the entire glass in one long gulp and placed it back on the table.

"Thanks," she said, sounding like a cowpoke finishing a shot of whiskey at the local bar.

"So, was it a runaway trailer?" Sydney asked, glancing at Kara's casts from top to bottom.

"Rolled off a cliff onto me."

"Wow. I bet that hurt. Shouldn't you be in a hospital?"

"I was for a few days."

"If it weren't for Lena, you'd still be in the hospital, right?" Sydney suggested.

"I needed someone who could give me injections and help me use the equipment."

"Injections? You mean you take shots?" Sydney made a face.

"Yeah. Twice a day," Kara said, wondering why she was telling this woman so much about her personal matters.

Sydney laughed, then reached out and touched Lena's arm.

"So, what's it like stabbing butt cheeks?" she asked. "Did Kara enjoy it?"

"Sydney," Lena said sternly.

"Little medical S&M?" Sydney pondered aloud.

"To be honest, I love it. If my legs weren't broken, I'd break them just to have Lena stab me," Kara declared.

"That's not funny," Lena glanced sideways at the two women.

"Come take a walk with me, Lena," Sydney said, placing her glass on the tray and rising. "Just for a few minutes."

Kara looked to Lena to see if she planned to accept Sydney's invitation.

"You can manage without her for a bit, can't you, Kara?" Sydney asked, taking Lena's hand and leading her toward the back door.

Kara wanted to say no. She wanted to cut Sydney down to size, saying Lena was her nurse and she might need her. But she couldn't do that. It was up to Lena to decide if she wanted to go with Sydney.

"I need to talk to Lena about some business details. You don't mind, do you?" Sydney added.

"That's up to Lena," Kara replied. "I'll manage."

"Great," Sydney acknowledged, pulling Lena along.

"We'll be right back," Lena said, looking back apologetically.

"No rush."

Kara looked away from the window, straining to see them as they crossed the yard. Sydney draped her arm around Lena and rested her hand just below her waist, thumb hooked inside Lena's jeans. When they went out of Kara's view, she was eager for them to pass by the other window. But when they didn't, she leaned as far as she could, hoping to catch another glimpse of them. Kara leaned forward and back, searching for a view through both windows. She wished she could reach the wheelchair to roll onto the porch so she could watch. She lunged toward it, but it was too far away.

She strained again to peer out the window. She had to accept that Sydney and Lena knew each other and probably quite well. After all, they went to the bar together and left together. She wondered where else Sydney's hands had touched Lena's body. If they had spent long moonlit hours clutching each other until their energies were spent and their needs satisfied. Kara couldn't see or hear them, but it didn't matter. She scowled at the way Sydney was probably touching Lena and how Lena allowed it.

"I can't be gone too long," Lena said as they headed for the pasture gate, Sydney's arm around her shoulders. "Kara might need me."

"She'll be okay for a few minutes. We need to talk."

"About what?"

"What do you think? I can't believe you took this job out in this godforsaken place without even asking me."

"It's just for a few months. And since when do I need your permission for a job?" Lena frowned. She wasn't pleased with Sydney's question or her domineering arm around her shoulder.

"You don't. Sorry. But I thought we had an understanding." Sydney opened the gate and held it for Lena, then closed it behind them.

"It's a long story, Sydney. I needed this job, and I wanted to be near my father. He's in a nursing home in Harland."

"I didn't know your dad lived around here. You never mentioned that."

"He used to be a cattle rancher."

"How's he doing?" There wasn't much sincerity in Sydney's question.

"Okay, I guess. Now, what do you want to talk about?"

"What do you mean?"

"You told Kara you had some business details you wanted to discuss with me. What are they?"

Sydney chuckled.

"I don't have business details. How else was I going to get you to take a walk with me? What should I say? Hey, Kara, is it okay if Lena takes a stroll with me so I can kiss her pretty lips?" Sydney swept Lena into her arms and kissed her. At first, Lena allowed it, but as the kiss grew longer and more passionate, Lena pushed Sydney away.

"Stop, Sydney," Lena said, looking back at the house to see if anyone could see them.

"Why?" Sydney replied, still holding her in a firm embrace. "No one can see us unless you count the cows." She kissed Lena again.

"Sydney," Lena protested, pulling away from her persistence.

"You know it drives me crazy when you act like that. Come on, sweetness. Tell me I'm bad. Tell me you'll spank me if I misbehave." Sydney avidly kissed Lena's neck.

"Sydney, please."

"You're not still mad at me about that night we went to that cheesy Western bar, are you? We'll have to find a different place for when you want to dance." Sydney nibbled at Lena's neck and blew in her ear, making Lena shiver.

"I wasn't angry with you." Lena didn't lie very well.

"Then why did you suddenly get a headache and want to go home alone? I had plans for us," Sydney whispered, not letting go of Lena.

Lena struggled to break free and strode across the pasture with wide steps.

"You were mad at me," Sydney declared. "Why? Because I didn't dance with you?"

Lena furrowed her brow at her.

"Don't be silly. I know you don't like dancing."

"Should I have been jealous when you danced with that other woman? Is that what you want from me? Should I be possessive?"

Lena narrowed her eyes at Sydney. "No one's possessive of me unless I say so, Sydney. And no, I didn't want you to get jealous. All I wanted from you was a little common courtesy." Lena continued across the field.

"Common courtesy? What the hell does that mean? When haven't I been polite to you?" Sydney followed her, grabbing Lena's arm and turning her around.

"That hurts," Lena responded, pulling her arm from Sydney's grip.

"Talk to me. Tell me what's going on between us."

"What do you think is happening between us?"

"Don't give me that psychological crap. Just tell me why you got a job on a ranch in the middle of nowhere without a word of explanation. How am I supposed to know what to think? I thought we had worked out our issues. I know I've done some stupid things, but I thought we were back on track. My God, Lena. We've known each other for fifteen years. How can you just move here and not tell me?"

"I explained. It's just temporary, and I needed the job." Lena looked at Sydney to see if she was even slightly curious about why she needed the job so desperately.

"That doesn't explain why you didn't tell me why you came here. Don't I have the right to know? All your message said was where you were."

Lena didn't respond. She just shook her head with disgust.

"When were you planning to tell me?" Sydney continued.

"Fine. Here. Sydney, I'm working as a CNA on a farm near Harland, Texas, taking care of a woman with two broken legs. I'll be here for eight to twelve weeks. I needed the job, and more importantly, I enjoy what I'm doing. I'm helping someone who needs me. Kara trusts me. She accepts me as I am. She doesn't want to change me."

"She's your patient. She has to trust you."

"As always, you only hear what you want to hear." Lena chuckled.

"What does that mean?" Sydney shot back.

"Nothing."

"Does this have something to do with me and Donna?"

Lena didn't answer at first. She wanted to tell Sydney no, her past indiscretions had nothing to do with their current issues. Lena suspected Sydney hadn't been faithful to their six-year relationship from the start, but she didn't confront her with her fears until she inadvertently overheard a voicemail message from Donna. Lena also suspected Sydney was seeing the woman again in secret. But Lena didn't want to step on those grapes again. Their tumultuous six years had drained any expectations that they could find long-term happiness.

"It's not like you to be so relentless, Lena. We've talked about this. You know Donna meant nothing to me. It was just one of those things that happen."

"That's what I thought the first time," Lena interrupted.

"It's behind us, sweetness." Sydney smiled affectionately.

"Behind? Every time I think it's behind us, it bites me in the ass."

"It's that woman over there, isn't it?" Sydney snapped, pointing at the house. "You like her, don't you?"

"Leave Kara out of this. It has nothing to do with her."

"Hell no, it doesn't. I can see it in your eyes. That's why you didn't tell me about taking this job. You've been doing it here. No one to bother you. You and the cowgirl can have a grand old time. You didn't think I'd find out." Sydney grabbed Lena and turned her. "You've been doing it with the invalid, haven't you? She lies in bed, and you take care of her business."

"Let me go," she demanded, looking at Sydney.

"You have. Good old Lena, the nurse, gets off on the sick."

Lena pulled away and ran toward the house.

"Lena, wait," Sydney called, chasing her. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that." She caught up with Lena behind the barn and pinned her against the wall.

"Let me go, Sydney," Lena choked, struggling to break free.

"Lena, darling. Let me explain. I was so worried about you. I was dying to know what happened. I can't stand it when we're like this." Sydney pressed her body against Lena, forcefully kissing her mouth, a kiss that hurt Lena's lips. Lena tried to escape Sydney's hold on her, but it was futile. She was no match for Sydney's strong arms and tall stature. Sydney thrust her tongue into Lena's mouth as she groped her body. Lena pulled the back of Sydney's shirt to push her away, but Sydney seemed like a wild animal. She forced a hand into Lena's jeans, scratching her soft skin. Lena moaned, trying to scream, but Sydney's mouth covered hers. Lena dug her nails into Sydney's shoulders, but it only spurred her on more. Lena reached out and grabbed Sydney's hair with both hands, pulling her head back.

"Let me go," Lena yelled as Sydney winced in pain. Sydney let go of Lena and grabbed her head, Lena still holding handfuls of her hair.

"Okay, okay. Let go of my hair." Sydney took a step back and rubbed her head as Lena released her, pushing her away.

"It's time for you to leave, Sydney," Lena demanded and headed toward the house. She took a few steps and turned back to Sydney. "If you do this to me again, I'll leave you bald. Are you listening, Sydney? I'm not your sex toy."

"I'm sorry, Lena," Sydney was still rubbing her head.

"And now that you've mentioned it, I don't think I can forgive as easily as I used to. You're not the person I want to forgive anymore, Sydney."

"What are you telling me?"

"Oh, Sydney. I don't think you're that dumb. Surely you can figure it out. If you need help, I'm sure Donna would be happy to assist. Where did you leave her while you came to the ranch? In Harland at the café or at the square to shop?"

Sydney's mouth dropped open. Lena shook her head as Sydney's expression confirmed what she had guessed. Donna had gone with Sydney to the conference in El Paso. For Lena, it was the final straw that killed the relationship once and for all. She wouldn't tolerate Sydney's infidelity any longer. She valued herself too much for that.

"Darling, wait. It's really not like that. Donna is just a friend," Sydney explained.

"Please, Sydney. Not this time." Lena turned toward the house.

"Lena, we haven't done anything. I swear. She just helped me drive." Sydney followed her onto the porch, waiting on the last step for Lena's forgiveness. "You have to believe me, Lena. Donna and I are just friends. There's nothing sexual between us. Not anymore," Sydney argued adamantly.

Lena looked at her from the higher step and pulled the collar of Sydney's shirt.

"Oh really? Which friend gave you these?" she asked, examining a couple of hickies on Sydney's neck. "I'll say goodbye to Kara for you."

"Can I at least use the bathroom before I go?" Sydney asked.

Lena crossed her arms and slowly shook her head.

"There's a cluster of trees about eight hundred meters down the road. Feel free."

Sydney looked at her and let out a disgruntled sigh. She turned around and walked toward the car. Lena waited until she was out of the way and sped off down the road, a cloud of dust marking her departure. Lena stood on the porch, thinking about what had happened. For the first time in her life, she had stood up for herself. She had pushed back. For the first time, she had refused to forgive and forget. She and Sydney had had some good times over the years, but for the first time, they hadn't been enough to outweigh the bad, and letting go didn't hurt at all. She took a deep breath and looked out at the pasture. A satisfied smile appeared on her face. Maybe Sydney was right. Maybe it had something to do with Kara. Whatever the reason, Lena opened the back door and entered with a sparkle in her eyes and a renewed sense of self-esteem.

Lena closed the back door and entered Kara's room. When she returned to the living room, Kara

was busy watching TV. Lena was at the end of the couch, holding something behind her back.

"That was cute," she said, looking at Kara.

"What was?" Kara asked, flipping to another channel.

"The look and the attitude. That's what."

"She started it."

"And you just had to finish it."

"What was that bib you were making me?" Kara shifted her gaze to Lena, trying to appear indifferent.

"I was trying to keep you from spilling your drink, but I see it didn't work."

"It was too full."

"So you had to drink it all in one gulp?"

"I was thirsty. You don't let me have iced tea very often."

"Well, let's see." Lena's eyes scanned the ceiling. "You had two water bottles, a large glass of orange juice for breakfast, a glass of milk, and a full glass of iced tea. I guess you probably needed it," she said, taking a plastic bedpan from behind her and placing it on Kara's lap.

Kara looked at her and then back at the TV.

"I hate it when you know what I need before I do," Kara muttered and then left the room. "Can I at least go to the other room? I'd hate for Sydney to knock on the door asking for directions and catch me sitting on a bedpan."

"As you wish, Tex," Lena mused, using the lift to maneuver Kara into the wheelchair. "Why do you think Sydney would need directions?" Lena asked as she helped guide Kara through the doorway.

"Did you notice which way she turned on the road?"

"Yes," Lena answered thoughtfully. "She turned right."

"And which way is the eastbound highway to San Antonio?" Kara removed the armrests of the wheelchair as they approached the dresser.

Lena didn't respond. She knew Sydney was heading back to Harland to pick up Donna.

"I rest my case," Kara added, then burst into victorious laughter. "I should have made you do this by yourself," Lena said.

"I can handle it," Kara reassured her.

"Yeah, I know. But then I'd have to mop the floor, so I guess I'll help."

"Hey, I'm getting better." Kara sat on the dresser as Lena held the wheelchair. They had learned that the wheel locks were no match for the weight of the casts.

"Uh-huh." Lena exited the bathroom, tossing a roll of toilet paper in Kara's direction. "Call me."

"I'm not a little girl you put in front of the TV with a potty training chair," Kara said.

"Of course you are," Lena replied from the other room. "You'll get a surprise if you go to the bathroom like a good girl."

"What kind of surprise? How about a Coke?"

Lena returned to the bathroom, holding the syringe for Kara's injection.

"I'll give you three guesses," Lena said with an ironic smile. Kara frowned at her.

"Sorry," Lena said, touching her shoulder sympathetically. It was the one thing she genuinely wished she could spare Kara, but it was for her own good. Lena helped Kara back into the wheelchair. "Let me see your belly."

Kara lifted her shirt. Her belly was covered in evenly spaced injection marks, brutally precise in their arrangement.

"Just as I thought," Lena said, examining Kara's sensitive stomach. "We need to move to a new spot for a few days. Do you mind?"

"Where?"

"Your hip. There's a lot of bruising and redness on your stomach."

"Great," Kara muttered, rolling onto her side so Lena could reach her hip.

Lena rubbed Kara's hip with alcohol before poking the small needle into her pale skin. Kara flinched a bit, hoping she would soon get used to the pain. As always, Lena patted Kara's shoulder and squeezed it, her silent apology for the pain she had caused.

"Let's get you into bed. I need you to lie on your stomach for a few hours," Lena said, lowering the bed completely. "I know it's not comfortable, but..."

"I know, I know. It relieves the pressure on my back and butt to prevent bedsores." Kara didn't mean to sound sarcastic. It just came out. When she was positioned on her stomach and her casts were properly aligned, Lena covered Kara's butt with a sheet. With carefully positioned pillows, Kara was ready for a few tedious hours. She couldn't do much besides stare at the floor, head tilted and arms by her side.

"Ready?" Lena asked, returning the lift to the corner.

"Yes," Kara replied, pulling her shirt out of her crevice. "You can call Sydney now," she added smugly.

"Why do you think I was going to call her?" Lena asked.

"I thought you wanted to discuss playing kissy-face in my pasture. Wasn't that what you two did on your little walk? Or was it more than that? You've been gone for a long time. Plenty of time for a quick roll in the hay."

"We didn't do anything like that," Lena responded angrily and gave Kara's butt a hard smack.

"Ow!"

"Serves you right." Lena walked out and closed the bedroom door, Kara's punishment for the smug comment.

Chapter 11

Kara had been home for only two weeks, and she was showing signs of cabin fever, something Lena had been observing. Depression had always been a challenge for patients who suddenly lost their freedom and mobility, even if temporarily. This particular day had been long for Kara. She wasn't used to sleeping on her back, and lack of sleep only made her more irritable. Breakfast hadn't gone well. The injection hurt more than usual. She couldn't get comfortable on the couch. Lunch was still churning in her stomach. She felt awkward and dropped the water bottle, the remote control, and a book she was flipping through, and the sheet wouldn't stay in her lap. Picasso was sitting on the coffee table, watching her as if she were a freak of nature, just how she felt.

"Go for a walk, Angus," Kara teased. "Unless you want me to pull your tail."

"Cut it out, Kara. And his name is Picasso, not Angus." Lena was carrying a stack of clean towels to the bathroom. She was humming something cheerful.

"But he doesn't look like a Picasso." Kara looked at the cat, trying to intimidate him off the table. He yawned and licked his lips.

"Nevertheless," Lena responded, disappearing into the bathroom next to Kara's room.

"Go on," Kara whispered, giving the coffee table a jolt. The cat leaped from the table to the back of the couch, using Kara's belly as a trampoline. "Ouch. You're a dead meat, cat." Kara rubbed her belly and checked for claw marks.

"Are you going to leave him alone?" Lena said firmly as she went upstairs with the rest of the towels.

"He attacked me," Kara replied. Picasso stretched out on the back of the couch, ready for a nap.

"Poor thing," Lena replied with a scowl. "I'll change my sheets, so try to behave a little. You too, Picasso." She disappeared upstairs.

Kara tried to find her place in the book, but found little interest in it. She tossed it onto the coffee table, but it slid and fell, knocking over a partially filled coffee cup. The cup hit the chair leg, shattering into several pieces and spilling the cold coffee onto the carpet.

Kara let out a disgruntled sigh.

"Are you okay?" Lena called.

"Yeah, just dropped my book. No big deal." She pulled the sheet off her lap and bunched it up. She aimed and threw it toward the spill, hoping to soak up the mess she had made, but only managed to knock over the floor lamp, adding a broken bulb to the mess. She grumbled to herself, shoving the coffee table out of the way so she could see the damage she had caused. Kara had always been the type to close an open cabinet door or secure a loose lid. She didn't leave dirty dishes in the sink overnight and cleared the shower drain of hair before leaving the bathroom. Having this catastrophe on the living room floor was something she couldn't ignore, and her irritable mood only made the situation worse.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Lena shouted from the top of the stairs, hearing the second crash.

"I'm fine. Just dropped it again." Kara refused to admit that she couldn't clean up her own mess.

"Must be a big book," Lena shouted back from upstairs.

Kara assessed the work ahead, growing increasingly frustrated with her inability. The wheelchair was behind the couch. She remembered Lena putting it there. If only she could maneuver around it from the end and front, she could get into it, roll, grab the broken glass, and blot the coffee. At least that was the plan. She had never transferred herself and her heavy casts into the wheelchair unassisted, but she was determined to give it a shot. She reached behind the couch, knocking Picasso to the floor, causing him to flee to the other room. She waved her arm blindly, searching for the wheelchair.

"Where is it?" she grunted, straining as much as she could reach. "There it is."

She inched the wheelchair along the back of the couch, switching to both hands extended overhead to guide it around the corner. She hadn't thought it would be so difficult to move an empty wheelchair such a short distance, but she was sweating and panting as she moved it inch by inch. She stiffened, struggling to make it around the last corner. She twisted her body at such an angle that her left leg slipped off the edge of the couch and dangled over the cushion's edge. Kara instantly stopped pulling the wheelchair and caught the cast, leaning to keep it on the couch. But it was too late. The leg slid in slow motion off the front of the couch. Her foot thudded onto the floor. The weight and angle pulled the rest of her body down too, her right leg jutting over the cushion. Kara winced in pain, shocked at how easily she went from reclined on the couch to sprawled on the floor. She tried to pull herself back onto the couch, but couldn't find the lever to hoist the massive casts back where they belonged. Her right leg started to ache from being held at an odd angle. She hated to do it, but pulling the right leg to the floor seemed like the only answer. She grabbed a pillow from the couch and threw it where the cast would fall, then rolled to her left side until she felt the right cast slide down and hit the floor, the pillow muffling the thud.

"Are you playing soccer down there or something?" Lena called.

"No. I'm whacking Angus with a shovel."

"That's not funny. Leave the book. I'll get it for you in a minute."

"Too late," she muttered to herself.

Kara lay on the floor, arms spread out and disgusted with her situation. She tried to sit back on the couch again, but it was futile. Her legs simply wouldn't cooperate. She sat up and scooted back, hands behind her, toward the wheelchair. Every few feet she had to stop and tuck her T-shirt under her butt as she pulled on her neck, choking her. Since she wasn't wearing underwear, her butt stung from the carpet burn. She finally reached the wheelchair. She locked it in place in the corner of the room, raised the leg rests, and locked the wheels. She positioned herself in front of it, sure she could lift herself onto the seat. After all, she could pull her weight up a rope. She could at least in high school. She could throw a calf to the ground, hold it with a knee, and tie its legs in under ten seconds. Hoisting herself 16 inches onto a wheelchair seat should be child's play. She reached behind and grabbed the sides of the wheelchair and pulled, but couldn't lift her butt high enough. She took a deep breath and tried again, this time throwing her upper body into it while pulling with her arms. All she managed to do was tip the wheelchair forward, hitting herself in the back of the neck.

"Ouch," she growled, crossing her arms over her head, rubbing the pain. Her nerves had taken all they could. She pushed the wheelchair aside, slamming it into the wall. She pushed again, this time leaving a mark on the wall.

"Damn it," she cursed, tears welling in her eyes from frustration. Kara pounded her fists on the

casts. She looked for something to throw. She grabbed the wheelchair with both hands and shook it hard. She pinched her fingers on the spokes, but the pain couldn't contain her anger.

"Kara!" Lena said, standing at the base of the stairs with an armful of sheets. "What happened?" She dropped the sheets and rushed to Kara's side, kneeling next to her. "Are you okay?" Her face turned pale, and her eyes filled with fear. "What happened down here?" She looked around the room. "Why didn't you call me when you fell?"

"I didn't fall," Kara pulled her fingers away from the spokes and gave the wheelchair one last push.

"It sure looks like you did. Do your legs hurt? Can you feel your toes? You didn't put weight on your legs, did you?" Lena struggled to check the color of Kara's toes and the appearance of the casts. She touched Kara's forehead, checking for fever, then checked her pulse.

"I'm fine," Kara declared, pulling her wrist away. "I'm not sick. I'm fine."

"Did you feel anything pop?" Lena frowned at her.

"Cut it out. Just cut it out," Kara yelled, her anger out of control. "Leave me alone. I don't want any help. I have to do this on my own," she shouted, her once blue eyes now red and swollen.

"Kara, what's wrong? Why are you acting like this?" Lena tried again to grasp her wrist.

"Acting how?" Kara asked, giving a defensive look. "You mean clumsy and stupid and dependent? That's me. Good old Kara, the freak on the floor who can't even get up without help. Hell, I can't do anything for myself anymore. Why not just put a diaper on me and stick me in a crib? Then I wouldn't be able to make any more mess for you to clean up," Kara yelled. "Maybe you should just hose me down in the tub, so you can wet me like a dirty dog." She tore at her shirt, pulling at the neckline.

"Kara, stop this," Lena said, grabbing her hands.

"I shouldn't even be wearing this. I don't need any clothes. I just spill all over whatever I wear. I can't even hold a damn glass without spilling on myself." She yanked the shirt, leaving a red mark on her neck.

"Kara," Lena demanded angrily. "Cut it out. You're going to hurt yourself." She grabbed Kara's wrists and folded them across her chest to restrain her.

"I probably couldn't even do that without help," she retorted, trying to pull away as tears streamed down her face. Her voice faltered, and her chin trembled as she struggled to free her hands.

"Kara, listen to me," Lena said, trying to calm her down. "Kara, stop fighting me and listen. It's only temporary. You're going to be okay."

"I don't care. I don't care." She tried to turn away and hide her face. Tears flowed down her cheeks, making things worse. Kara wasn't and had never been a crybaby. Tears showed vulnerability and weakness in her character, and she hated that. She also hated that Lena saw her this way.

Lena released Kara's wrists and wrapped her arms around her, pulling her close.

"I care," Lena said. She could feel Kara's sobs against her shoulder. She held her tightly and rocked her gently. "I care."

Kara first fought against Lena's hold on her, then succumbed to it, clinging to Lena as

overwhelming sobs took over her body. She needed Lena's warm embrace as much as she'd ever needed anything. She bore all the disappointment, frustration, and helplessness she could for a day. Maybe it had been building up since she woke up in the hospital and saw her legs in casts or just since she came back home and realized her situation. Either way, Kara needed to cry and release her feelings once and for all.

Lena knelt beside her, cradling Kara in her arms and whispering to her.

"You don't have to do this alone. I'm here for you. I don't mind, Kara. I don't mind. Let me take care of you." Lena cooed reassuringly as Kara cried. "We can do this together. You tell me what you need, and I'll do it. Whatever it is, I'll help you." She stroked Kara's blonde curls as she held her.

Kara trembled as the tears subsided and she regained her composure. Lena gently wiped away the tears. There was a certain gentleness in Lena's touch and voice that told Kara everything would be okay. Lena brushed the hair away from Kara's face and smiled at her with a look of trust and understanding.

"Lena, I'm sorry. I don't know where that came from," Kara said, lowering her eyes as a blush of shame covered her face.

"Shh," Lena replied, wiping the last traces of tears from Kara's face. "It's okay. I understand. I don't think I could have lasted as long as you without doing that." Lena lifted Kara's face and smiled at her. "This is all part of the shock to your system. Post-traumatic stress." She said in a forgiving voice. "I should've expected it."

"I shouldn't have." Kara was still embarrassed, medical reason or not.

Lena sat on the floor next to Kara like two old friends sitting on a porch swing.

"We'll get you through this. I promise," Lena said softly, placing her hand on Kara's.

Chapter 12



Tuesday morning brought a heavy rain that left the air thick and the sky dark. Kara aimlessly rolled her wheelchair through the living room and dining room, weaving figure eights among the furniture. The empty days were dragging on, and she was bored. By the afternoon, the sky had cleared, and the summer air was fresh, but she was stuck inside, her cast-covered legs bumping into everything in the room. She longed to be outside. She turned on the television, but before it even came into focus, she turned it off and tossed the remote onto the couch, too restless to watch. She rolled to the window and looked out at the corral where Coal was munching on hay. He seemed as bored as Kara. She wished she could take him for a ride, even if just for a few minutes. Or even just stroke his shiny coat. But she knew the wheelchair wouldn't navigate well on the soft ground around the corral. For a fleeting moment, she wondered if Coal would fit in the bathroom. She cracked the window a few inches and whistled at him, the whistle that he knew meant Kara was watching. The stallion lifted his head and let out a deep whinny, then shook his head.

"Hey, Coal. You're getting fat, you lazy thing." She chuckled and closed the window. She rolled to the kitchen and opened the back door, looking out at the yard, eager for the moment she could swing open the screen door and step out into the sun.

"Do you want to sit out on the porch for a while?" Lena asked, noticing Kara by the door. She was kneeling on the porch.

"What are you doing in the dirt? Did you fall?" Kara inquired, straining to see what she was up to.

"I'm planting some flowers. I can't believe you don't have any flowers around here." Lena was digging into the soil with a trowel. She was wearing gardening gloves with green and pink flowers and a cap pulled down over her forehead. But Kara didn't notice the cap or the gloves. All she could see was the white shorts and the bright blue top Lena was wearing. The thin strap tied at the nape of her neck seemed loose and allowed a wonderful view of Lena's cleavage.

"Who has time for gardening? Besides, it gets too hot for flowers," Kara said, straightening up in her wheelchair to get a better look.

"Not if you plant the right kind and water them," Lena continued, scratching at the soil as Kara

watched. It wasn't polite to stare, but the sight of Lena's firm, round breasts bouncing with every stroke of the trowel was more than Kara could resist.

"Shall we go into town to buy flowers?"

"I already did. I got some when I went to the grocery store yesterday."

"And where was I?" Kara asked, trying to remember where she was when the flowers were bought.

"You were sleeping. Lexie came and sat with you while I ran into town and back." Lena kept digging as a bead of sweat trickled down her neck and settled into the valley between her breasts.

Kara couldn't help herself. She slowly ran her tongue over her upper lip as the droplet of sweat slid down onto Lena's top and disappeared.

"Maybe I'll go out on the porch for a while," Kara offered, her eyes fixed on Lena's front. She pushed herself through the door before Lena could rise and assist.

"Wait a minute. Let me hold the door for you," she said, gathering up her muddy gloves and climbing the steps.

"I got it," Kara grumbled as she wheeled her bulky chair over the threshold. Lena grabbed one side of the chair and pulled, maneuvering it to a spot on the porch where she had a view of the flowerbed as well as the corral.

"Do you need a cushion or something?" Lena asked, wiping the back of her glove across her forehead, leaving a muddy smudge.

"No. And you? Looks like you could use some water," Kara replied, looking at her. "I'll get you some." She turned the wheelchair toward the door but bumped into the rocking chair, sending it crashing into the window, nearly shattering the glass. Lena grabbed the back of the chair, preventing it from hitting the window again.

"You stay here," Lena announced. "I'll get the water." She adjusted Kara and locked the wheels. She went inside and returned with two cold water bottles. She handed one to Kara and tried to open hers, but her hands were too sweaty to twist the cap.

"Here," Kara said, trading her open one for Lena's.

"Thanks," she said, taking a long gulp.

"Slow down. You're in Texas. Don't fill up the cold tank too fast. You'll get a bellyache."

"I'll remember that, Doctor," Lena replied, pouring a bit of cold water onto the back of her neck before returning to gardening. Kara immediately noticed that the cold water caused Lena's nipples to harden, their erection clearly visible through the thin fabric of her top.

"I should've brought my sunglasses out with me," Kara mumbled to herself, her eyes trailing Lena's cleavage relentlessly.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," Kara replied, forcing her gaze onto the yard.

"You can't stay outside too long. The heat isn't good for you," Lena said, once again digging and planting. "It can be too taxing on your system so soon after surgery."

"I know," Kara said, stealing another glance at Lena's breasts in her peripheral vision. "I don't think I could handle much of that."

Kara redirected her attention and her gaze to the corral. Coal stood at the gate as if waiting for her to come let him out. He snorted his insistence.

"Sorry, Coal. Can't come out there, buddy. You'll have to make do without me for a while."

"He's a beautiful animal," Lena said, looking over her shoulder at him.

"Yeah, he sure is. Just ask him. He'll tell you." Kara chuckled, giving a whistle. Coal whinnied back long and loud, pacing back and forth. "Think you're something, don't you, you old glue pot." Kara gave a different whistle, and he backed up several steps. She made a hand motion, and he immediately stopped, lowering his head.

Lena watched, rooting for his antics and laughing as Kara had him show off.

"Did you teach him all of that?"

"Sure did. It's not hard. He's a smart animal. He's not used to not being ridden. He probably doesn't get why I don't go out there and saddle him."

"I guess so. Animals have a way of understanding. Look at Picasso. He knows when I'm not feeling well."

"That cat doesn't know which way is up," Kara laughed.

"He does too," Lena declared defensively. "He's just as clever as that horse of yours." Lena glanced at the window where Picasso was perched on the sill. A fly landed on the outside of the glass just inches from the cat's face. He pounced on the insect, smacking into the glass and falling to the floor. Kara and Lena could hear a furious yowl from inside.

"Okay, fine. Clever cat," Kara agreed with a smile.

Lena smiled and resumed digging. There was a scratch at the door and the sound of a solitary meow.

"Hey, Angus, want to come outside?" Kara called, reaching out and opening the screen door. The cat slinked out, barely passing through the door before it closed.

"Don't pay attention to her, Picasso. She's just grumpy because she can't play with her horse." The cat rubbed against the wheelchair, then went down the steps and watched Lena before heading off to do cat things.

"I know what that cat is thinking."

"What's that?" Lena grumbled as she removed a large clump of roots from the flowerbed.

"Angus is thinking you're building a cat box right at the back door. He can't wait to christen it."

"He's not thinking that. He's never dug in my flower beds or used them as a litter box. He's too refined for that." Lena sat back on her heels and looked at the cat as it dug in the corner of the house where she had already planted flowers. "Picasso, knock it off," Lena ordered. Kara laughed out loud.

"I rest my case."

"I'd smear mud on your face, smart pants, but I'd only have to clean it up." Lena scolded in Kara's direction.

"Admit it. You like the name Angus."

"I will do no such thing."

"Call for him," Kara suggested teasingly. "Come on. Call him by name and see if he responds."

"Fine," Lena said, sitting down and clearing her throat. "Here, Picasso. Here, kitty, kitty." She added some kissing sounds, trying to coax the cat out of the flowerbed, but with no results. "Picasso, come here, kitty," Lena patted the ground beside her, but the cat looked on disinterestedly.

"My turn," Kara announced.

"He won't come to you. Your casts freak him out."

Kara gave a sharp, high-pitched whistle and snapped her fingers.

"Here, Angus. Come here. Angus," she called, her voice light and friendly.

The cat looked at Kara and meowed, then walked over and bounded up the steps, tail wagging in satisfaction. Kara leaned down and gave the cat's head a pat, then looked at Lena with a raised eyebrow.

"Picasso, you're a traitor," Lena teased, turning back to tending the garden.

Picasso squatted and leaped into Kara's lap, purring loudly and demanding to be petted.

"Hey, I don't like cats," Kara said, waving him off.

"You should've thought of that before you claimed him as yours."

"I'm not claiming him. I'm just naming him." Kara leaned back as far as she could and awkwardly patted the cat's back. "Go play, Angus." She nudged the cat, hoping he'd jump off and hide in the bushes. Instead, he circled in Kara's lap, making biscuits on her stomach before curling up for a nap.

The sound of a horn and a cloud of dust on the road caught their attention. Lexie waved as she pulled up the driveway, towing a horse trailer. She stopped near the porch with the back of the trailer facing the steps. She got out of the truck with a grin like a Cheshire cat.

"Hey, Lexie," Kara greeted.

"Hi, Lexie," Lena offered, sitting back on her heels and wiping dirt from her gloves. "What's going on with you?"

"I've got something to show you," she said, her smile so wide it looked like it might hurt.

"Patsy had her foal?" Kara asked cheerfully as Lexie unlocked the trailer gate. "Let's take a look at it."

"She's got a guardian, Kara. I'm telling you, she's got a guardian," Lexie said proudly. She carefully led a Palomino mare out of the trailer and tied her up by the door.

"Where is it?" Lena said, leaning against the trailer and peering inside. A tiny animal was sitting in the front corner of the trailer, its thin legs tucked beneath its tiny body. "Oh, Lexie, isn't he the cutest little baby horse you've ever seen?" Lena cooed, smiling affectionately.

"It's a she, and yeah, I guess so," Lexie stroked the mare's nose. "You're a good mama, Patsy, my old girl."

"Is she palomino or does she have Patsy's coloring?" Kara asked, squinting to see inside the dark trailer.

"Oh, Kara, she's so precious. She's golden yellow with a little white tail," Lena whispered, as if speaking of a sleeping baby.

"Let me get her out," Lexie said, stepping into the trailer. She lifted the foal, cradling the little body in her arms. The mare whinnied as Lexie placed her baby beside her. The foal let out a soft whinny.

"You're right, Lexie. This one's a keeper." Kara smiled at the tiny animal, unable to hide her affection for the baby. The foal had completely won Kara's heart, just like all the new ranch horses did. The baby nuzzled against its mother's side, seeking the teat. Its stubby tail twitched nervously until it found sustenance and began to nurse.

"Isn't that the sweetest thing you've ever seen, Kara?" Lena said, with a glint in her eye as she watched the mother and her newborn.

"I have to admit, a brand new foal is pretty special."

"Calves are cute too," Lena offered.

"If they're small enough, they are," Lexie muttered.

"No kidding," Kara agreed, looking at Lexie.

"What do you mean if they're small enough? Larger calves are cute too." Lena looked at Kara with curiosity.

"Farmers like small calves."

"I hate to sound dumb, but why would you want small calves? I thought the idea was to raise big, fat cows for market."

"When calves are too big, they risk hurting the mother during birth," Kara explained. "If we're not around to see that the cow is in trouble, we could lose both the baby and the mother. Smaller calves mean less risk at birth, especially with heifers. We don't want the first child to be the last."

"They'll grow fast enough," Lexie laughed.

"I guess I never knew that, but it makes sense," Lena replied, turning her attention back to the foal. "What did you name Patsy's baby, Lexie?"

"I haven't decided yet. Any suggestions?"

"I've never named a horse before. Seems like a big responsibility."

"It's like naming anything else. You just pick something," Kara advised.

"I think that's something Lexie should do. But she's the most precious little thing I've ever seen, your little yellow thing, you." Lena smiled adoringly at the tiny horse.

"You just named her," Lexie said, looking at Lena with a wide grin. "Amarillo."

"Amarillo?"

"It's Spanish for yellow. Perfect."

"Good name, Lena," Kara agreed.

"Hello, Amarillo," Lena said tenderly.

"She's going to be a looker in a year or two. You'll want to ride her."

"I don't know about that," Lena said, suddenly returning to her gardening.

"I'd better get Patsy and Amarillo back home," Lexie said, carrying the foal back into the trailer and placing her on the straw bed. She led Patsy to the other side of the trailer and tied her reins to the post.

"Thanks for bringing Amarillo over," Kara said. "Patsy did a good job."

"Yeah, thanks, Lexie. She's wonderful," Lena added.

"Talk to you later," Lexie said, getting back into the truck and driving away. She honked and disappeared down the road.

"Wow. It sure is hot out here," Lena said, wiping the back of her hand across her forehead. She stretched and straightened her posture, her top straining to contain her breasts. "I think you'd better go inside. I don't want you to get too overheated." Lena shielded her eyes from the sun and looked at Kara.

"No doubt about it. If I stay out here, I'll definitely get overheated," Kara said, lifting her head as though looking at the pasture, but her eyes weren't following. They were on Lena's top. The way the sweat glistened on Lena's smooth legs all the way up to the hem of her short shorts was a sight to behold. Kara needed to go inside, that was for sure. She realized she was feeling better when even the suggestion of a woman's nipples showing through a top raised her blood pressure.

"I think I'll splash some cold water on my face," Kara said, heading for the door. She gave one last look at Lena's flexibility and then closed the door, letting out a desperate groan. "Yeah, that's definitely a hot sight."

Chapter 13

"Kara," Lena said, gently shaking her shoulder. Kara was dozing off on the couch, a restless night's sleep catching up to her. "Kara, you have company."

Kara blinked awake, ready to tease Lena about disturbing her beauty sleep.

"Hi, Kara," said Amber, rushing over to the couch and hugging Kara gently. Her eyes held a sympathetic expression of pain. "We heard you had an accident, and we came to see how you're doing."

Kara looked over Amber's shoulder to see Sonny, Nancy, and AJ, all standing in line like pallbearers, their faces marked with concern.

"Hey, sweetheart," Nancy said, coming over to give kisses and hugs too.

"Hey, what are you guys doing here?" Kara pulled herself into a sitting position, trying to get her bearings.

"You look so tired," Nancy said, running her hand through Kara's hair.

"Come in and sit down," Lena said, pointing to the chairs.

"Look at those huge casts," declared Amber. "We were so worried. How did this happen?"

"Blowout on the horse trailer," Kara replied, getting used to recounting the story. She'd learned to condense it into a few manageable sentences. "It slipped into the ditch and rolled on top of me."

"Ouch," Sonny said, bending down and rubbing her own shins. "I thought maybe you got kicked by some hot chick." She winked and then chuckled wickedly.

"No, that's more your style," Amber joked, giving Sonny a playful shove.

"Kara, if you don't need me, I think I'll water the flowerbed," Lena said, making sure Kara's sheet was in place and her casts were properly propped. "Call me if you need me. There's soda and lemonade in the fridge if you want anything. Make yourselves at home."

"Okay, thanks," Nancy said, smiling at Lena and watching her exit the room. Once Lena disappeared from sight, and they heard the back door close, all eyes turned to Kara with great curiosity and surprise.

"Wow, Kara," Sonny said, breaking into a smile. "That's the brunette from the bar. How did you convince that hottie to take care of you? Maybe I need to break something myself."

"Yeah, not bad, you little charmer," Amber agreed, winking at Kara. "Does she give you sponge baths?"

"I bet Kara makes her wash a lot of things," AJ teased.

"Stop it," Kara insisted. She frowned at them and what they were suggesting. Kara used to participate in good-natured, inappropriate jokes, but when it came to Lena, she didn't like any of it. She found their insinuations offensive. "It's not like that. Quiet. She'll hear you."

"Oh, come on. Don't tell me you two haven't, you know," Sonny said, raising her eyebrows.

"No," Kara declared firmly. "She's my nurse. She's a certified nurse, and that's it."

"She can nurse me anytime," Sonny looked out the window, leaning forward and hoping to catch a glimpse of where Lena had gone.

"Sonny, you had your chance with her. Remember, you danced with her but let her slip away," AJ reminded her.

"Kara," Amber said in a soft whisper, leaning in closer. "What kind of gem is your nurse? A jade that matches those beautiful eyes?" Amber sighed as she spoke.

"Will you stop it?" Kara asked. "Lena is a CSN, and she's very good. She's taking care of me while I recover. Now, shut up about it." Kara scowled at them. "I'd still be in the hospital if it weren't for her." Her sudden protective attitude surprised even Kara. She had no idea why, but defending Lena to her friends felt like the right thing to do.

"I'm sorry," Amber apologized. "We didn't mean to upset you. We were just having some fun. You know how we are."

"Yeah, honey. We didn't mean anything by it," AJ added. "I'm sure she's a wonderful nurse. Pay no attention to us."

"We're all just idiots. Really, we're glad you have a good nurse."

"I can't wait for you to get better," Amber said, rubbing Kara's arm. "You owe me a dance as soon as you're on your feet, okay?"

"Of course, Amber. Keep practicing," Kara smiled at her. "I'll be fine. The doctor said after rehab, I'll be good as new."

"We'll throw a party for you at the Rainbow," Sonny said.

"Yes, a party," Nancy agreed cheerfully. "You know how they have debutante balls? Well, we can have a farewell party."

"I'll make a cast-shaped cake for you," Amber offered.

"No, make it in the shape of your cowboy boots. She won't want to think about those casts," AJ suggested. "We want Lena to come too. Really."

"I was thinking of bringing some drinks for you guys before I leave. It's a long drive from San Antonio," Lena said, carrying a tray from the kitchen. They didn't hear the back door open, and they all immediately turned red at the thought that Lena was nearby and probably heard their teasing and lustful innuendos. Lena set the tray on the coffee table. "Lemonade?" she said lightly as if nothing had happened.

The women sat in silence for a long moment, sipping lemonade quietly, their eyes downcast in embarrassment. Lena smiled at Kara, winked, and walked away to get a drink of water. She had the last word without saying a thing.

"Yes, a very good nurse," Kara muttered, smiling to herself. In that moment, all Kara could think about was Lena's soft skin and how she looked in that top. She hated to admit it, but yes, she wanted to taste that gem.

"You must like nurses. Wasn't that what Jane was?" Nancy asked.

Kara looked at Nancy, her mind going back to a hazel-eyed beauty she hadn't thought about in a long time.

"I remember Jane," AJ declared, smiling at Kara. "She wasn't a nurse, Nancy. She was a firefighter, or was it an EMT? What happened to her?"

"I don't know. I heard she moved to Dallas or somewhere," Kara answered as she stumbled down memory lane. They all saw the smile grow on Kara's face. They also saw the moment it turned into a stunned and vacant expression.

Kara met Jane Watkins at the Rainbow Desert in the bar's first year of operation and fell in love with her so quickly and intensely that the impact could be felt all the way to the Rio Grande. Jane batted her long lashes at Kara, and she was lost. A 35-year-old ex-Navy captain, Jane knew how to dance, flirt, kiss, and lick her lips in all the right ways. Kara spent many late nights driving between the Cottonwood Ranch and San Antonio to court the hazel-eyed seductress with the dazzling smile. Jane spoke softly and was attentive. She listened to every word Kara said and dressed the way Kara liked. She was a quick learner, eagerly picking up all the things that melted Kara's heart into butter. Jane was a lesbian's dream. Beautiful, a great lover, and loyal to the end. But unfortunately for Kara, the end came. Jane was satisfied with a six-month relationship and nothing more. Like all her romances, Jane liked them short and sweet, something Kara wished she had known in advance. But it might not have made a difference. Kara was a victim of Jane's charm. She didn't know why Jane preferred to avoid long-term commitment, but the reality of it hit Kara so hard that she couldn't see straight. For over a year, Kara refused to date or even dance with anyone, coming to the Rainbow Desert only to drink and dream. For a while, she blamed herself. She fell in love too early and too hard. Jane mentioned a long list of past girlfriends - she met all of them at the bar for the first time. But Kara didn't read the signs. She assumed the other women simply didn't measure up. She never thought she would also end up at the bottom of Jane's conquest list.

"I remember her," Sonny said, smiling at the floor. "I was a day late on that one. You beat me to it."

"The next one is yours," Kara offered with a wink.

"I think I've missed a good one," Sonny replied, glancing out the window where Lena was watering the flowers. She looked at Kara, reading her expression. Kara just looked at her, a hint of a spark in her eyes.

After Kara's friends were satisfied that she was in good hands, there were hugs and kisses for Kara and Lena before they headed back to San Antonio.

"Do you mind if I go into town this afternoon?" Lena asked after taking the tray of glasses to the kitchen. "I want to visit my dad."

"Of course, go ahead. I'll be fine. Take all the time you need. Say hi to Lion for me."

"I will, but your mom is coming to sit with you. I'll only be gone for a few hours."

"I don't need a babysitter."

"Kara, I'm not going unless she can be here in case you fall," Lena said, giving her a determined look.

"My mom can't pick me up, and she can't operate the elevator either."

"All she needs to do is ask for help. Lexie said she can swing by to check on the horses anyway."

So, your mom either comes to visit you or I don't go. You decide."

Kara finally nodded.

"I'm here!" her mother called cheerfully, opening the back door.

"Over here, Mom," Kara replied, not liking the idea that she needed to be watched over.

"Hi, Eliza," Lena greeted her with a hug. "You look lovely."

"These are my new capri pants, and I simply love them. I never liked this length on me before, but these are so comfortable. How's my daughter today? Did you sleep well last night, dear?" she chatted as if she were meeting a long-lost friend.

"I'm fine, Mom. How are you? How's Dad?" Kara asked.

"We're well." She gently stroked Kara's head, then tidied up the sheet, folding it at the edge of the pillow.

"I think I'll get ready and head into town. Do you need anything from the market, Eliza?" Lena asked.

"I don't think so, dear. I was just in town yesterday. If I think of anything, can I call your cell?"

"Absolutely. Please do. I have to head straight to the supermarket. And you, Kara? Do you need anything?"

"Chiliburger and onion rings?" Kara asked calmly but with a strong suspicion that Lena would say she couldn't have that.

"Yes, well..." Lena cleared her throat. She rushed upstairs to get ready, then headed into town.

It was the first time she had visited since convincing her father to move to the nursing home. The staff was cautiously optimistic that he was ready for visitors. Lena was looking forward to the idea that she could finally sit down and have a good conversation with him. She bought him a new pair of pajamas and slippers, hoping it would please him. She brought her sketches and planned all the things they would talk about. Even though it was a brief visit, as the staff recommended, she wanted it to be enjoyable.

Lena parked in the visitor's lot, checked in at the nursing station, and walked down the hallway to Lion's room, the third door on the right. She knocked on the door and peeked in. He was sitting in a chair with the television on, shaking his head. She entered the room and knelt by his side, gently touching his arm.

"Hello, Dad," she said softly.

He opened his eyes and looked at her with a confused look.

"It's me, Dad. It's Lena." She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek.

He continued to look as if he didn't recognize her.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Lena," he said as if trying to remember the name.

"Yes, Dad. It's Lena." She brushed his thin hair off his forehead and smiled at him.

"What day is it today?"

"Thursday, Dad. It's Thursday, the sixteenth."

"Thursday," he repeated, a vacancy in his eyes telling her it didn't matter.

"What did you have for lunch today?" she asked, trying to bring him back to reality.

"I think we haven't had lunch yet," Lion replied. His eyes scanned the room for something familiar.

Lena knew he had already had lunch. It was two o'clock. But she didn't press.

"I'm sure you will soon, Dad."

"What's in the bag?" he asked, noticing the package she was carrying.

"Brought you a new pair of pajamas, Dad. I know you like the ones with snap buttons instead of buttons." She pulled out the navy blue pinstripe pajama shirt and held it up for him to see. He stroked the sleeve, his frail, aged fingers caressing the fabric.

"Are there pants too?" he asked.

"Of course," she reassured him and pulled them out. "I also brought you a new pair of slippers."

"I don't need slippers," he replied, frowning at her extravagance. "I have slippers."

"I know, but those are too big for you. I don't want you to fall." Lena patted his arm and opened the box. She looked down and noticed that his slippers were on the wrong feet. "Let me put these new ones on you, Dad. I think you'll like them. They have nice thick padding."

Lion watched as she changed the slippers, making sure they were the right size.

"There. How do they feel?"

"Are these new?" he asked, studying them. "These aren't mine. Whose slippers are these?"

"Yes, they're yours. I bought them at Culmer's here in town. I can exchange them if they don't fit." Lena checked the fit and was satisfied they were the right size. "Brought you a sweet treat too, Dad." Lena handed him a small white bag, hoping he'd let the new slippers stay on and ignore them.

He opened the bag and pulled out one of the candies, popping it into his mouth.

"These are lemon drops," he declared, his eyes gleaming. He tilted the bag toward Lena and offered her one, which surprised her. She didn't care much for lemon drops, but she took one to please him.

"Thank you, Dad."

"Did it rain today?" he asked, stirring the candy in his mouth.

"No, it's hot outside. It might rain tomorrow, I heard. The ground could sure use some rain. Have you seen the flowers in the garden, Dad? They're lovely. I saw them when I came in. Would you

like me to walk you to the recreation room to see them?"

Lion looked at her curiously, as if not understanding.

"Would you show me your garden, Dad?" she asked in a different tone.

Lena accompanied Lion toward the recreation room, her arm linked with his. He held her hand as they walked down the hallway, his steps hesitant and stiff.

"How's this beautiful afternoon, Mr. Luthor? You have a lovely escort there," one of the nurses said with a smile as she pushed a wheelchair past them.

Lena smiled back, but Lion paid little attention. They passed through the dining room and entered the recreation room, where a group of residents was gathered around a piano singing songs from the 1950s.

"Look, Dad. Why don't you sing along?"

He shook his head and kept his eyes on the windows overlooking the garden. A oscillating sprinkler was watering the flowers, splashing against the window as it completed its circle. Lena stood beside him, allowing her father to use her arm as support.

"It takes a lot of water to keep them blooming. Did you know that?" he asked, his eyes scanning up and down each row of flowers.

"I'm sure it does, Dad. They're so lovely. I wish my garden looked as beautiful." She put her arm around his waist. She noticed he was thinner than she remembered, and his stooped posture made him appear shorter. "Do you know what those little yellow flowers are, Dad? I don't recognize them."

"Yellow bells," he replied, studying them.

"That's right," she agreed, rubbing his back. "I still have that gardening book you gave me. I use it all the time."

"When did I give it to you?"

"High school graduation. You sent me to the botanical garden in Galveston. Remember? You gave me a round-trip ticket and a room at a hotel right on the beach."

"Galveston," he repeated, trying to resurrect a memory from that time.

"I learned to prune roses." Lena squeezed his hand.

"Do you have roses, Lee?" It was the first time in years that he called her by that nickname, and it touched her deeply. "I like roses in a garden."

"Yes, Dad. I have yellow tea roses and a red climbing rose that grows over the garage. I had over three hundred blooms on it this year. It was spectacular. Maybe next year, you can come see it."

Lion continued to gaze at the sprinkler making its sweep across the flowerbed.

"Three hundred roses," he murmured. "That's a good climber. Do you water, Lee?"

"Yes, Dad. Just like you taught me."

Lion lost interest in the garden and turned around, ready to head back to his room.

"Do you need anything, Dad?" Lena asked, holding his hand as they walked slowly down the hallway. "Do you want something special? Maybe some of those cookies you like? The coconut macaroons."

"I don't need anything," he replied. "The food is good. I had chocolate cake. Do you like chocolate cake?"

"Yes. Mom used to make a good chocolate cake," she said, but immediately wished she hadn't mentioned her mother. She held her breath for what Lion might say.

"Lilian made pie, not cake," he said sharply as they entered the room. He sat in his chair and looked at Lena. "She made chocolate pie."

Lena didn't want to argue with him. It didn't matter.

"She wouldn't make chocolate cake for me," he continued, apparently lost in his memory of that time, over thirty years ago. "I asked her, but she wouldn't. Lemon cake. She made lemon cake. I hate lemon cake." He wrinkled his nose and looked at Lena for agreement.

"But you like lemon drops, Dad," she said, handing him the bag of candies.

"Hell, I do. I hate lemon." He made a face at her and threw the bag across the room. "I told you. I hate it." Lion gripped the arms of the chair and leaned forward, a vengeful fire in his eyes. "Don't tell me what I like."

"I didn't want to upset you, Dad." Lena picked up the scattered candy as best she could and tossed it in the trash.

"Why did you inherit that from your mother? You can't do anything right. I don't want to hear about her."

"I know, Dad. I'm sorry," she said in a calm voice.

"I don't want to hear anything about her," he continued, staring out the window as if in a daze.

"Should I put your new pajamas in the drawer for you?" Lena could see that Lion was irritated, and she wanted to defuse the situation before it got worse.

"I don't need any new pajamas. My pajamas are fine."

"Okay, Dad." Lena left them by the bedside.

"Lilian never made chocolate cake," he insisted. "I don't want you talking about her. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Dad." She didn't want to make him angry, but it seemed like it didn't matter what she said. He was fueling his own fire.

"You're going home," he said, waving his hand at her.

"I wanted to show you the sketches of the sculptures I'm working on." She pulled the stack of photos from her bag.

"I don't want to see them. You need to leave," he insisted, raising his voice.

"I wanted your opinion on what kind of cattle I should use," she said, trying to divert his attention.

"I said go home!" he shouted, getting up and looking at her. He waved his arms at her, shooing her towards the door. "I want you to leave now. And don't come back. Go on," he grumbled.

"Okay, Dad. Calm down. I'll go," she said, gathering her photos and bag.

"I don't want any pie, Lilian. I want cake." He scowled at Lena with a vague but angry look in his eyes.

"Mr. Luthor, is everything okay?" asked a nurse, entering the room.

"I want her to go home and leave me alone," he said, pointing his finger at Lena.

"Calm down," Lena said in a soft voice. "I'm leaving, Dad." She looked at the nurse, conveying her concern about her father's sudden outburst.

"Mr. Luthor, it's okay, dear. Have a seat," the nurse said.

Lena waited in the hallway, holding her bag, while she listened to the nurse trying to calm Lion down enough for him to sit. She closed her eyes, hoping tears wouldn't fall and stream down her face. She didn't know what had happened. The visit had started innocently. Lion was a bit disoriented, but she expected that. She knew not to talk about her mother. She scolded herself for ruining their conversation. She didn't get a chance to show him her work. She also didn't tell him that she loved him. Lena wanted to go back to his room. She wanted to hug him, but she knew he didn't want that. It would only reignite his anger.

"Goodbye, Dad," she murmured softly.

The nurse left the room, closing the door behind her.

"He'll be fine, miss. He'll rest for a while," she said, patting Lena's arm sympathetically. "Don't worry, dear. He'll be okay."

"I didn't mean to upset him," Lena replied.

"I know. Sometimes it takes the smallest thing. We'll keep an eye on him. By dinnertime, he'll be back to his usual self." She smiled reassuringly. "He won't remember who he was upset with."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Just give him some time, dear."

"Will you call me if he needs anything?" Lena asked.

"Of course, we will. We'll take good care of him."

"Thank you," Lena said. "Tell him his daughter said goodbye." She started down the hallway, then looked back. "Will you tell him that I love him?"

"I will, dear. I will."

When Lena returned to the ranch, Eliza was sitting in the living room watching soap operas and writing thank-you notes for the birthday gifts she and Jeremiah had received.

"Hello, dear. How was your trip to the city?" Eliza asked, closing her stationery box.

"Good." Lena carried several bags of groceries into the kitchen. "You should see the peaches at the IGA. They're huge." Lena pulled one from the bag and held it up. "Would you like to take some home with you?"

"Thank you, but I got a bushel of them the other day. Aren't they something?" she said, coming into the kitchen. "Jeremiah loves peach jam on toast. J'onn's daughter-in-law makes the best jam you've ever tasted. She won a blue ribbon for it at the fair last year. I'll send some your way."

"That would be wonderful," Lena replied, unpacking the bags and putting away the groceries. "Kara would love some, I'm sure. I'm not much of a cook."

"I'm not so sure about that. Kara seems to be eating well." Eliza touched Lena's arm and whispered, "Kara can't cook beans worth a darn. She never had time to learn. She was more interested in riding horses than baking a pie." She chuckled.

"Well, I don't know how to bake a pie either," Lena admitted. "How is she, by the way? Did you two get along?"

"Yes. She's fine. We didn't have any problems. Lexie stopped by. She helped her to the bathroom, and then Kara wanted to go to bed." Eliza's eyes saddened. "I sure wish I could help take care of her. She looks so helpless with those big casts on her legs."

"You don't have to," Lena replied, noticing Eliza's disappointment. She gave her a reassuring hug and smiled warmly. "That's what I'm here for. You make her a pie, and I'll handle the nursing stuff. By the way, where is she? Sleeping?"

"Yes. We played gin rummy, and suddenly, she got really tired."

"Is she sick?" Lena asked instantly.

"No," Eliza laughed. "She was losing a lot. I won six hands in a row."

"Ah," Lena laughed.

"And you, dear? You look tired or something. Are you okay?" Eliza studied Lena's eyes.

Lena didn't want to admit that most of the trip back to the ranch was spent getting over the mood her father had put her in.

"I'm fine, Eliza. But thank you for asking. It was just a long day."

"You have to take care of yourself, dear. What would we do if you got sick?" Eliza smiled affectionately at her. "If you don't need me anymore, I think I'll head home and see what Rita made for dinner. I'm so glad we hired her to cook all our meals. I'm not much of a cook anymore."

"You wouldn't like to eat with us? I'm making beef with pasta."

"That sounds wonderful, but no. If I'm not there to call Jeremiah for dinner, he'll be working with those cows until midnight. I remember one night when he and Kara were in that barn pulling calves until the wee hours of the morning. I had to take a thermos of coffee and a box of sandwiches to them, or they would never have eaten." She sighed thoughtfully. "Tell Kara I'll call her tomorrow." Eliza gathered her things and left Lena waving from the back porch.

Lena finished with the groceries and went to check on Kara. Her head had slipped off the pillow, and she was snoring. Lena carefully adjusted her head on the pillow and pulled the sheet up over

her. She checked the color of her toes and glanced at the top of the cast. Satisfied that Kara was okay, she quietly left the room, closing the door behind her.

"Hey," Kara said sleepily. "You're back?"

"Shh, go back to sleep," Lena replied in a whisper.

"I'm awake." Kara stretched and raised the head of the bed.

"I didn't want to wake you. Sorry."

"I'm glad you did. If I nap too much, I won't sleep tonight. How was your dad? How was the trip to the city?"

"I brought some peaches and a new kind of whole wheat bread. You said you didn't like the last kind I bought."

"Great. How was Lion?"

"Did you know they sing together every Thursday afternoon at the nursing home? The activities director plays the piano in the recreation room, and everyone joins in." Lena laughed. "You should hear them. I've never heard so much singing in my life."

"Lena, how's your dad?" Kara persisted.

"Let's just say that Lion was Lion," she replied. Lena picked up a box of tissues that had fallen on the floor and placed it on the bedside table, then turned to leave, but Kara grabbed her hand, stopping her from leaving.

"What happened?" Kara asked, still holding Lena's hand.

"Nothing." Lena avoided eye contact. "It went fine, just fine." The muscles in her jaw tensed.

"Really?" Kara asked, trying to see Lena's face. She pulled her closer.

"I have to start dinner. Do you want green beans or carrots?" Lena tried to pull away.

"I want you to tell me what's wrong, that's what I want." Kara took Lena's other hand and turned her towards the bed. "What happened, Lena? Is Lion okay?"

"Oh, Lion is fine. He's shaved, clean, and wearing the new clothes I bought for him. He's eating well and has good color. He hasn't looked this good in years."

"And?"

"And he still..." Lena began, but a lump formed in her throat, and her eyes welled up with tears.

"He still what?" Kara held onto Lena's hands. Lena slowly looked up with sadness in her eyes.

"He still hates me."

"No, he doesn't. He doesn't hate you. You're his daughter. He may not like being in the nursing home, but he surely knows it's better there, with a clean bed and hot meals. He'll get over you placing him there. Give him some time."

"He doesn't need time. He loves it there. He has women fawning over him, taking care of him, and cooking for him. He doesn't have to lift a finger. He doesn't hate me for putting him there. In fact,

he thinks it was his idea to move to Glen Haven. He has a private room because no one can stand sharing a room with him. He's in seventh heaven." Lena straightened her posture. "This has absolutely nothing to do with how he feels about me."

Kara pulled Lena to sit on the edge of the bed next to her.

"What did he say?" she asked, gently stroking Lena's arm. Lena hesitated, as if thinking about it was too painful.

"Lena?"

"He told me to leave the room. He told me to get out and not come back."

"Why?" Kara asked with a frown.

"I have no idea. I gave him a hug. I brought him a new pajama and some candies he likes. I was hoping we could have a nice conversation. I wanted to tell him about the sculptures I was working on for Merrill's centennial, but as soon as I mentioned my mother, he didn't want to hear it. He got up from his chair and started yelling at me. He didn't want to see me. I thought they would have to sedate him."

"Lena, I'm so sorry. I know you were looking forward to seeing him." Kara squeezed her hand.

"The nurse said most of the time he's fine. He has these little episodes, but they don't have any problems with him. He just sits there, watches TV, and chats with the other residents. He doesn't try to wander off."

"What triggered his outburst against you?"

"Kara, he's always felt this way about me. It's nothing new. I just thought maybe, with senile dementia, maybe he'd be different. Maybe he'd changed or at least forgotten how much he hated me. I just wanted to be able to talk to him without him telling me how much of a disappointment I am."

"If you'll excuse me for saying this, he's out of his mind. I have no idea how you could be a disappointment to anyone. You're a nurse and an artist. You're smart and creative. You're beautiful and funny." Kara flashed a warm smile, hoping to brighten Lena's mood. "How could he not be proud of you?"

"Because he's Lion Luthor. That's just how he is. When I was about five, he thought I should learn to ride a horse. He said if you live in Texas, you need to know how to ride. He thought I should have been born with that skill. He put me on this huge horse. It was probably just an average-sized horse, but when you're five, all horses are huge. I was terrified. I remember screaming and gripping the saddle horn for dear life. The horse stood there, and I was hysterical. He told me to hold the reins and sit up straight. I was crying and yelling for my mom to get me off. He didn't want to hear it. He got on behind me and kicked the horse's sides. That horse took off like a shot across the field, galloping at full speed. I was so scared I couldn't breathe. I just closed my eyes and waited. He turned it around and galloped back, bouncing me up and down in the saddle so hard my butt was sore. He held the reins but didn't hold me."

"You fell?" Kara asked with concern.

"No. But I wish I had. I thought if I fell, at least I wouldn't have to ride anymore." Lena let out a reflective sigh. "When he stopped, my mom took me down and sent me inside the house. They had one of their big screaming fights about it. He said I'd be a disgrace if I didn't ride."

"You were five, for heaven's sake. And not everyone in Texas knows how to ride a horse. Believe it or not, my mom doesn't know how to ride a horse. She's afraid of them too," Kara offered in defense.

"I bet you were already riding when you were five."

"In fact, I was three, but everyone in the county says I was born on a horse. Dad tells everyone my first diaper was made of leather and had stirrups. I don't understand why your dad thought you had to ride if it scared you."

"I have no idea. I have no idea why he thought my scholarship to the University of Texas was a waste of time just because it was also art."

"And what about your nursing training? He must have been proud of that."

"I doubt it. He wanted to know why I couldn't make up my mind about what I wanted to do. I didn't tell him I took the nursing course so I could take care of Mom when she got so sick. She wanted to stay home and couldn't afford a nurse, so I did it." Lena lowered her gaze as her mind returned to those years.

"How long was she sick?" Kara asked gently.

"About five years. She might have survived a few more years, but she had a stroke."

"I'm so sorry, Lena."

"It was a blessing. She was practically bedridden. She was in constant pain and wasting away." Lena smiled at the ceiling as if she were comfortable with her mother's death. "Cancer is a cruel taskmaster."

"It sounds like you were a brave and caring daughter."

"Yes, well. I'm batting .500. My dad doesn't think so."

"You're batting way above .500. You're taking care of me, and you're doing a great job." Kara touched Lena's cheek. "That has to count for something."

"Thank you, but my dad..."

"Your dad has senile dementia. He can't remember what day it is today. Don't let what he said today bother you." Kara studied Lena's face. "I have to ask you something, Lena. It may not be my business, but why did you take this job as my caregiver? I asked the hospital social worker, and she told me you walked in and volunteered to work. Why? I mean, our first two encounters weren't exactly what friendships are made of. Did it have something to do with Lion?"

"I needed a job," she replied. "And you needed a nurse."

"But you're an artist, a good artist. Why did you need to work as a CNA in Harland? You live in San Antonio. Surely, you could find work there."

"I needed a job that paid well and immediately."

"Turbulent?"

Lena nodded.

"Bad?"

Lena nodded again.

"IRS?" Kara asked cautiously.

"Property taxes. Three years and penalties."

"Have you taken care of that?" Kara asked carefully.

"I will."

"Lena, let me help," Kara insisted. "Let me pay."

"Absolutely not," Lena replied in her most inflexible voice. "This is my responsibility. And besides, it's almost paid off. When you're recovered, I'll have made the final payment to Mr. Henry."

"Let me advance it for you now."

"No, Kara. I won't hear of it. Not one more word about it."

"Do you need me to keep the casts on longer so you can earn more? Would it make a difference?"

"No, I'll be fine. And you couldn't wait a second longer than necessary anyway," Lena replied with a laugh.

"Probably not," she muttered.

"But thanks for the offer."

"Does your father know what you're doing? Does he know you're paying his debts?"

"No, I don't think so. He doesn't understand his financial situation. If he did, I'm sure he'd pay them himself. He was very careful with money. I know you don't think he was a farmer or a father, but in his time, he was."

"I'm sure he was. I heard he had a small operation, but he had the best cattle in the county. He was well-liked by his fellow farmers."

"He was a kind man, but that was years ago. That was before he and my mother divorced. I hardly know him anymore."

"I bet their separation was tough on you."

"I was very young, but I remember we had good times together. They reconciled a few times, but it was short-lived."

"They couldn't have children of their own?" Kara asked.

"No. And I think each blamed the other. He wanted a son to take over the ranch. She wanted a daughter to dress in frilly clothes and show off to her friends. They spent their time together picking at everything. If she made chicken for dinner, he'd want a hamburger. If he brought candy, she'd want flowers." Lena shrugged. "By the time I came along, I think their marriage was already over."

"Maybe they thought you would be the tonic they both needed."

"Maybe. Or Mom needed someone to stand by her. I think I reminded Dad of their marriage and how it fell apart."

"You can't think you're responsible for their divorce, Lena," Kara gently offered. "That has nothing to do with you."

"I know. But I certainly didn't help. I was like a thorn in Lion's side. I just rubbed him the wrong way."

"Does it have anything to do with you being gay?"

Lena smiled thoughtfully.

"That was the icing on the cake. After he found out I had an arts scholarship, which he thought was a waste of time, and then divided my attention with CNA training, he didn't need much to find my life utterly useless in his eyes."

"But you're a wonderful artist. Has he ever seen your work?"

"I sent clippings and photos to him, but he never mentions it, and after seeing the inside of his house, I bet he's never seen them."

"I can guess what it looks like. I went to the door a few times. He never let me in, but I could see inside. It looked kind of messy." Kara chose her words carefully, not wanting to hurt Lena's feelings even more.

"Messy?" Lena scoffed and shook her head. "I went in the day I signed him up for the nursing home. He needed some clothes and pajamas and his personal things. I hadn't been to the house in several years. He never answered the door when I came to visit him. He would tell me later that he wasn't home, but I knew he was there, looking out the window. Well, when I opened the door, I thought I'd made a mistake. I thought I was in the wrong house. It looked like a hoarder's dump. I could hardly get in the door. He saved every scrap of paper, box, and empty container he ever had. Every plate, pot, and glass in his kitchen was covered in grease and crispy food. Kara, I was so shocked. I never thought he'd let his home get so bad. I took one look and ran out. I didn't even look for clean clothes. I knew he wouldn't have any. All the clothes I saw were in nasty piles. There was rat feces and spiderwebs everywhere. I didn't get past the living room and kitchen. I have no idea where he slept. I couldn't go down the hall to the bedrooms."

Kara held Lena's hands firmly, hoping to console her.

"I'm so sorry, Lena. I had no idea."

"I couldn't go back in there. I know I should, but I just can't."

"You don't need to go in there. It's not something you need to do right now. Someday he might want to go back in there. He might get better and be able to live on his own again." Kara had no idea why she said that. She wasn't a nurse or a doctor, but she knew Lion Luthor would never be well enough to live on his own again. But she also didn't want Lena to wrap her problems around herself so tightly that they suffocated her. She wanted to help Lena. She wanted to protect her from this never-ending pain that Lion was causing. "Someday I'll go with you."

"I'll be fine. I'll have to wait until I'm ready." Lena blinked back a tear. She gave a small smile and got up.

"When you go back to see him, you'll see. It'll be like old times. He'll be eager to see you. He'll ask

where you've been and why it's been so long since you've come to see him."

"So, do you want green beans or carrots?" Lena asked, regaining her composure.

"You're going to go visit him, aren't you?" Kara asked, trying to read Lena's face.

"I don't think so."

"Lena, don't let his condition keep you from seeing your father. You know you want to go back."

"What I want isn't in Glen Haven, Kara. That's not my father." She went to the door and looked back. "I'll let you know when dinner's ready."

Chapter 14

"Lena," Kara called from her room. It was past midnight, and the house was in darkness. The only sound was the rhythmic ticking of the old clock in the hallway. Kara didn't want to disturb Lena. She had learned to manage the bedpan herself at night. She could slide it under her rear and pull it out again without spilling a drop. Lena insisted there was no problem in calling her for help, but Kara wanted to maintain some dignity. But tonight was different. She didn't need the bedpan. That wasn't what was bothering her. It was a pain in her leg, a pain unlike anything she had ever felt before. It wasn't a bone pain. She had learned to recognize that. It was a muscle pain, a deep, stabbing pain. This was a hellish charley horse, and she couldn't do anything about it. If she had a saw, she would gladly cut the plaster off her leg, even if it meant taking her leg with it.

"Lena," she shouted through gritted teeth, the pain growing stronger with each passing second. She could hear footsteps coming down the stairs.

"What's wrong?" Lena said, frantically turning on the light and rushing to her side. "What happened?" She looked at Kara's face, instantly reading the distress in her eyes.

"My leg," Kara grimaced, writhing in pain. She twisted in bed and grabbed the plaster on her left leg.

"Describe the pain to me, Kara," Lena demanded as she went to the foot of the bed and held the plaster in her hands. She examined Kara's toes and squeezed them to check for temperature.

"It hurts. Like a charley horse," Kara winced, turning away from her.

"Only that?" Lena asked, checking the other toes.

Kara nodded, her eyes tightly shut and her teeth clenched.

"Did it hurt when you went to bed?"

Kara shook her head vigorously.

"It just started. It woke me up. It's killing me, Lena. It hurts too much. We have to take the plaster off. I can't bear it," Kara choked, grabbing the pillow behind her head as tears rolled down her face and onto the pillow.

"It's a muscle cramp, Kara. A charley horse," Lena lowered the bed completely. She pushed the sheet aside and sat down beside Kara, pulling her shoulders up into a sitting position. "Sit up, Kara."

"I can't. I can't."

"Yes, you can. Let's stretch it as much as we can. Come on. Sit up." Lena helped her up, positioning herself behind Kara for support. She wrapped her arms around Kara's chest and hugged her. She could feel every muscle in Kara's body tense with pain. "Lean forward, Kara. Lean forward as far as you can."

Kara struggled against Lena's grip, the pain controlling her mind and body.

"I can't," she said, gripping the sheet with both hands and stiffening. She screamed loudly, big sobs consuming her.

"Yes, you can," Lena responded with a soothing voice. "I'll help you. We need to stretch the back of your thigh. Lean with me, Kara. Lean." Lena coaxed her forward as she pressed against her back. "Now back and forth again," she said reassuringly. "Easy. Back and forth." She continued to sway Kara forward, bending her at the waist until she felt her body start to relax in her arms. "That's it."

With slow but steady pressure, Lena continued to bend Kara forward, stretching the tendon and working the cramped muscles. Lena could feel Kara's body dripping with sweat through her shirt.

"How are you feeling?" Lena asked.

"Better," Kara replied, breathing heavily due to the effort, sweat rolling down her face.

"We should do this every night before you go to bed," Lena said, finishing a few more repetitions, pushing Kara forward and backward with gentle pressure.

Kara let out a sigh of relief as the pain subsided.

"Sorry, I had to wake you up, but I couldn't move."

"That's what I'm here for," Lena replied, still sitting behind Kara and holding her in a sitting position. "How are you feeling now?"

"Much better. Thank you," Kara said. "I didn't mean to act so stupid about it." She lowered her gaze, well aware of what she had done in the midst of the pain.

"You didn't act stupid," Lena said gently. "You were in pain. I probably would have done the same thing. It's okay. I don't mind." She released her grip around Kara's chest. "Let me get a clean shirt for you. That one's all sweaty."

"Okay. I've taken enough of your sleepless night."

"Baby blue or white with a horse?" Lena asked, holding two T-shirts from the drawer and ignoring Kara's comment. "You'll catch a cold if we don't change it."

"Blue, I guess," Kara reached out to take it, getting ready to change shirts.

"Just a second," Lena said, going to the bathroom and returning with a wet cloth and a towel.

"I can do this. You can go to bed. Thanks for your help."

"Shh." Lena pulled the sweaty shirt over Kara's head and tossed it in the hamper. She washed Kara's back and shoulders. When she moved to the front, she sat down beside the bed, giving her task her full attention. She rubbed each arm and then moved up, then shifted to Kara's chest, wiping the towel over each breast with gentle motions. The whole time Kara watched, studying Lena's face as she performed her nursing duties. Lena pulled the towel from Kara's shoulder and dried her body. "There. Don't you feel better?" Lena asked, tossing the cloth and towel in the hamper as well.

She picked up the T-shirt and pulled the collar over Kara's head, as if dressing a child. The arms came next, but before Kara slid one arm into the sleeve, Lena looked at her. Their eyes met and froze Lena where she sat. For a long moment, they sat staring at each other, no movement between them. Slowly, Kara reached out and tucked a strand of hair that had fallen over Lena's face. Lena didn't move. She sat holding the shirt around Kara's neck.

"Let me help you put on your shirt," Lena finally said, her eyes still on Kara.

"You don't need to be a nurse all the time. I can do some things on my own," Kara replied, pushing another strand of hair over her shoulder.

"I know. But that's what I'm paid for." Lena felt a tingling sensation that made the hair on her neck stand on end as Kara touched her. She shivered deeply.

"Your shirt is sweaty too," she said, hooking a finger in the collar of Lena's nightshirt. "We should change that. You can wear one of mine."

"I'll be fine," Lena replied, another shiver sending a flush to her face.

"You'll catch a cold if we don't," Kara said, pulling Lena's nightshirt's hem.

"Wait," she stammered.

"Hands up," Kara said, battling Lena's reluctance.

"Stop. I'll change upstairs," she argued, pulling the shirt back down.

"Let me guess. Nurses don't take off sweaty shirts in front of patients, right?"

"I can change my shirt by myself."

"And I can't?" Kara chuckled.

Lena realized she didn't have an answer.

"If you're embarrassed, just say so," Kara said.

"No, I'm not embarrassed," she replied hesitantly.

"Then hands up."

Lena sat on the bed for a moment, then raised her arms. Kara pulled the damp shirt over her head and tossed it aside. Lena sat with her eyes lowered. She knew Kara was looking at her. She could feel it. She could also feel her nipples hardening.

"See how easy that was?" Kara whispered softly, unable to tear her gaze away from Lena's perfectly formed breasts.

Lena sat still as Kara's eyes drank in every curve and smooth line of her form. Lena knew it was fair. Kara had undergone examinations so many times that her modesty had surely vanished. As a nurse, Lena had seen many patients naked. Some had beautiful bodies with tan muscles and well-toned shapes. Others had pale, old, and frail bodies of sick patients barely clinging to life. She never thought much about herself, not when she was busy caring for the sick and the afflicted.

"Here," Kara said, pulling her own shirt and sliding it over Lena's head. She guided Lena's arms into the armholes and placed them over her body. "Now you're ready for bed."

"I'll get one for you," Lena said.

Kara grabbed her hand to stop her from getting up.

"I don't want one. I'll just use the sheet."

"But," Lena began to say.

"I really don't want one," she whispered. "I usually sleep naked."

Lena smoothed the sheet over Kara's lap as she sat next to her.

"Are you ready for bed now?" Lena asked, desperate to keep her eyes away from Kara's breasts, abdomen, and her dark pubic hair patch. For some strange reason, this wasn't a patient's body. It was Kara's body, the body of a beautiful and desirable woman.

Kara adjusted the hem of Lena's shirt.

"Are you?" Kara asked softly.

"It's almost one o'clock. You need to rest."

"I'm not tired," Kara replied, resting her hand on Lena's thigh. The touch made Lena moan softly.

"Do you need a drink or something?"

"No," Kara replied in a warm whisper. "I don't need anything. I'm quite content just sitting here like this." Kara lightly squeezed Lena's thigh.

"Are you ready to sleep now?" Lena asked, eager to change the subject and keep her eyes off Kara's body.

"I said to you, I'm not tired." Kara smiled, pushing the sheet down to her waist. "And you are too."

"I mean, go to sleep," Lena corrected, pulling the sheet back up over Kara.

"I'm in bed," Kara smiled, pushing it down again.

"It's late. You need to rest to keep up your strength." Lena pushed Kara's shoulders back down on the bed and covered her again.

"I don't need rest," Kara argued, sitting up in bed and taking Lena's hand. "Why don't you sit and talk to me? We can talk about lipstick. I don't wear it, but you can tell me about the different colors." Kara patted the bed next to her.

"I need to sleep, and so do you. Now lie down." Lena pushed her shoulders back onto the bed and wrapped the sheet around her as if somehow it would hold her in place.

"Goodnight." She rushed out the door and closed it, leaving the light on.

"Hey," Kara called, sitting up again.

The door opened a few inches, and Lena's hand slid in, turning off the light and closing the door again. Kara heard footsteps going up the stairs. There was a hesitation, then the footsteps descended a few steps. After a moment, Lena continued up the stairs. The creak of the headboard revealed that Lena had climbed onto the bed. Kara crossed her hands behind her head and smiled at the ceiling. There was no way she could sleep tonight, not with Lena's beautiful, diaphanous body sleeping directly above her like a tantalizing vision. Kara may be disabled with thirty pounds of plaster on her legs, but she still had feelings and desires, desires that were not accustomed to being ignored. Even with tangled hair and a sleepy face, Lena Luthor was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. Her kiss ignited something in Kara that she had never felt before. She didn't know what it was, but she liked it and knew she would spend the rest of the night reliving it.

Chapter 15

"Do you want to go into town or something for a few hours?" Kara asked after hanging up the phone and rolling into the dining room. Lena was standing at the dining table, organizing papers and juggling sketchbooks.

"Why? Do you need something?" she asked, trying to find enough space to spread out her work.

"No, I don't need anything."

"Here, hold this for a moment," Lena said, handing her a box of charcoal pencils. Kara complied, rolling as close as she could to get a look at Lena's work.

"I just thought that since Lexie was coming, you might want a break. She'll be here for a few hours. Coal is expecting a visitor."

"Coal is expecting a visitor?" Lena asked curiously.

"Yes, an Appaloosa mare. Heavy date," Kara said, giving a crooked smile.

"Oh, a stud service heavy date," Lena joked.

"Yeah, but don't tell him. If he knew I'm getting paid for his services, he'd want half." She picked up one of the sketches and held it up for examination. "I like this one. What is it?"

"It was supposed to be a cactus. But I'm not sure about it. It falls short."

"I still like it," Kara said, placing it back in its place. "So, you want some time away from here?"

"I have some errands I could run. When is Lexie coming?"

"Any minute. It was her on the phone. She just picked up the mare and is on her way."

"I'll go if you promise to behave. Remember, absolutely no weight on your legs of any kind. That means you stay in the chair or on the couch, period," Lena narrowed her eyes at Kara. "Promise?"

"Scout's honor," Kara replied. "Besides, when it comes to breeding horses, they pretty much do it themselves."

"Yeah, but you have to promise me anyway."

"Okay, I promise. I won't help Coal kill the mare."

"That's gross," Lena said.

"If you knew how much Coal's stud fees cost, you wouldn't say that. Her granddad was a big champion. Coal sires some expensive horseflesh."

"Is he a gentleman about it?" Lena teased as she began stacking her supplies.

"Of course. He's a Danvers. We're all polite about our hookups," she pondered. "No, scratch that, T-bone has a mean streak. For a registered Black Angus bull, he acts more like a Brahma. He doesn't like waiting."

"And you?" Lena asked with a laugh, filling two cardboard boxes to overflowing. "Are you patient?"

"I'm learning to be," Kara replied, her eyes scanning Lena's back as she picked up a box. "Here, put this box on my lap," she said, patting her thighs. "I can carry it."

"I won't," she grimaced. "It's too heavy."

"My legs aren't broken here." Kara followed her into the kitchen and watched Lena stack the boxes on the sink counter. "I could've held it in my hands," Kara argued.

"Thanks, but it's all done." Lena smiled and patted Kara's shoulder as she headed for the stairs. "I'll be down in a moment."

Lexie honked as she pulled into the yard and stopped by the corral. Kara rolled onto the back porch and watched Lexie unload the mare and lead her into the corral. She gave the skittish animal a few minutes to settle before opening the gate and letting Coal in.

"Beautiful mare," Kara called, trying to see between the truck and the trailer.

"Susan thanks you. She's glad we agreed to bring the mare here. She backed the truck into the corral and tore up a three-foot hole in the fence. Pulled three posts out of the ground," Lexie laughed. "Does she have any relation to Lion," she added, shouting from the other side of the yard.

Before Kara could reprimand Lexie for her comment, Lena stepped out onto the back porch. Her expression told Kara that she had heard Lexie's joke.

"I'm sorry, Lena," Lexie stammered. "I have a big mouth. She lowered her eyes.

"It's okay, Lexie," Lena replied, though it was obvious Lexie's words had hurt her.

"She didn't mean anything by it, Lena," Kara added, gently touching Lena's arm.

"I know." Lena smiled back at Kara. "Lion's reputation follows him everywhere."

Lexie came over to the porch, still red-faced.

"I'm really sorry. If you want to slap me or something, I'll understand."

Lena descended the three steps and smiled at Lexie.

"No, I don't want to slap you," she said softly. "I know how much trouble my dad gave you. It's okay." Then Lena gave Lexie a stern look. "But I will slap both of you if I come back and you let Kara do something foolish. You both know her limitations." Lena chuckled. "It's like leaving a first grader in charge of a kindergartener."

"Hey, I'm the first grader here," Kara declared.

"No, you're not," Lexie teased. "I'm the first grader. You're the stuck-up kindergartener. I'm in charge."

"I'm out of here. You two can argue about it as soon as I'm out of the driveway. And remember, Lexie. No beer for Kara. She just had her injection." Lena shot a disciplinarian look, then climbed into the van and drove away, waving through the window.

"Well, she's gone," Kara said brightly.

"Don't get me in trouble here," Lexie replied.

"I have a job for you, and we'll have plenty of time to finish before she comes back."

"What kind of job? Does it have anything to do with your legs and you getting out of that chair?"

"No, you're safe. I'm not doing anything I shouldn't," Kara replied, rolling inside. "Let's go."

Lena went to the supermarket, the hardware store, the gas station, and offered to have lunch in town. She swung by Glen Haven to check on her dad, but he was napping. She decided it was best not to wake him. She called Kara twice to check on her, both times concerned because it took four rings to answer.

"Don't you have the cordless phone in the bag next to the chair?" she asked when Kara answered breathlessly.

"I think I put it on the table," Kara replied, seemingly distracted.

"Are you doing okay? How are your legs? Any pain?"

"No, I'm fine."

"How's Coal?" Lena joked. "Is this date going well?"

"Yes," Kara replied, not offering much conversation.

"Do you need anything?" Lena asked, trying to determine if Kara was okay.

"I don't need anything. No rush."

"Okay," Lena heard the click of the line. "I guess she's done talking," she muttered to herself. She stopped at the feed store and bought a bag of cat food for Picasso, then headed back to the ranch, still curious why Kara seemed distracted and indifferent to her call. She pulled into the yard and parked next to Lexie's truck.

"I'm back," she called out, carrying her purchases inside. Lexie entered the kitchen with a guilty smile. Kara rolled in behind her. Both had guilty looks, and that didn't go unnoticed by Lena.

"Hi," Kara said quickly.

"Hi," Lexie replied in the same artificial tone.

"What?" Lena said, looking at them cautiously.

"What, what?" Kara asked, straightening the sheet on her lap.

"If anyone ever looked like the cat that ate the canary, it's you two." She put her hands on her hips. "What have you been up to?"

"Nothing," Lexie offered, desperately trying to look innocent.

"Yeah, nothing," Kara agreed.

"I'd better go unload the mare and get back. I'm sure Coal has taken care of business. I heard them snorting at each other." Lexie grabbed her hat from the kitchen counter and jammed it on her head.

"Thanks," Kara said, following her to the back door.

"No problem." Lexie cast a glance at Lena, then closed the door behind her.

"Why do I feel like you've done something against the doctor's orders?" Lena suggested, studying Kara for clues.

"I didn't do anything against the doctor's orders. Believe me." Kara turned her wheelchair and rolled back into the living room. "I'm innocent," she added as she rolled away.

"That's debatable."

"I heard that. And if you don't behave, you won't get to see your surprise. So there."

Lena came to the door and looked at Kara skeptically.

"What surprise?" she asked.

"Oh, you'll see."

"When is this surprise happening, if I dare ask?"

"After dinner."

"Oh, man. I forgot to defrost anything," Lena choked and went to the fridge. "It's after six already, and I have nothing out."

"Don't we have leftovers or something?"

"No, that's what we had for dinner last night," Lena searched the fridge for anything that could pass for dinner. "How about a salad and," she continued searching, "baked sweet potato?" she asked hopefully, holding up two sweet potatoes.

"What's a baked sweet potato?"

"If you give me twenty minutes, I'll let you know." Lena went to the sink and scrubbed the potatoes. Kara rolled into the kitchen and took them from her hands.

"I want a bologna sandwich and an apple," she said, tossing the potatoes back in the trash.

"That's not enough for dinner." Lena opened the freezer, looking for something she could thaw in the microwave.

"It is. I want a sandwich, with mustard, of course. I'll help make them."

"Are you sure? I'm sorry, Kara. I shouldn't have gone to town today. I didn't finish all my chores, and now you have to eat a cold sandwich for dinner," Lena scolded herself.

"I like bologna."

"But you need something healthy. Bologna isn't very good for you."

"My legs aren't going to fall off, believe me. It's fine," Kara reassured with a smile. "I won't fire you for missing a meal."

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Lena began making sandwiches, her face full of guilt.

"I really don't mind. Plus, now you can see your surprise earlier."

"You're going to tell me what you and Lexie have been up to?"

"Okay," Kara said, unable to wait another minute to show Lena what she had done. "Let's go." She waved for Lena to follow her.

"Where are we going?" Lena helped roll the wheelchair, waiting for Kara's instructions.

"To the end of the hallway," she said, pointing to the storage room.

"There? If this is to show me some new saddle or bullhorn box you've put in that room, forget it. I don't want to see it. That room is a mess. I'm surprised it doesn't walk on its own." Lena said, hesitantly rolling her toward the closed door. "There's no space for us in there anyway. It's packed to the ceiling."

"It's not anymore," Kara said, reaching out and opening the door. She pushed it and rolled inside. "It's now officially Lena Luthor's art studio."

Lena gasped as she looked through the door. The room that used to house everything Kara couldn't get rid of was now empty of everything except a spare dining table, an adjustable chair, a floor lamp, and a bookshelf. A clothesline had been strung from one corner of the room to the other with clothespins to hold Lena's artwork. A piece of paper hung on one of the clothespins read WELCOME TO LENA'S STUDIO.

"I thought you needed a place to put your art stuff where you didn't have to keep picking it up all the time. You can spread out here and just leave it. Close the door and come back later." Kara moved aside so Lena could see.

"Oh, Kara," she smiled, running her hand over the table. "This is wonderful. How did you do all this? Did you carry all this in your lap like I told you not to?" She frowned at Kara.

"No, I didn't. Lexie did the loading. I had her put everything in the barn. I didn't even know half the stuff was in here. But I found my extra saddle blanket."

Lena hugged Kara around the neck and gave her a big sloppy kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you." Lena smiled, beaming. "What a cool thing for you to do. I don't think my art room at home is this big."

"I should have done this before, but I was busy being an idiot," Kara replied.

"No, you weren't. You were just getting used to your casts." Lena stroked Kara's face. "This is wonderful. I was having trouble keeping my work organized. I didn't know what I had done and what I hadn't. Thank you. You're so thoughtful. And you were going to let me feed you a bologna sandwich. Now I really feel bad for not thawing anything."

"Don't worry about it."

"I can't wait to set up my things." Lena rushed out of the room on her way to the bathroom.

"Wait a minute. Come back here," Kara called. She opened the closet door and pointed to the boxes of Lena's art supplies neatly stacked on the floor. "You mean these?"

Lena's smile widened.

"You thought of everything." Lena put the boxes on the table and began organizing her supplies.

"As I have to sketch every angle for each sculpture, I end up with a lot of them. This will be perfect."

"Give me something to stack up here on the shelves," Kara said, looking at one of the boxes. "What's this?" She pulled out a fully articulated wooden mannequin with movable limbs. She shook it, making the arms and legs flop.

"It's a fully articulated and poseable mannequin," Lena explained. "And don't break it, please."

Kara stopped playing with it and placed it on the shelf. She chose from the art materials, examining each item. She tried out a few, doodling here and there on a piece of paper. "I don't see any crayons here."

"I guess I don't have any."

"How can you be an artist without crayons and white paste? You know, the kind in a jar that you have to spread with a stick."

Lena laughed. "I had the box of forty-eight crayons when I was a kid," Kara announced.

"Wow, forty-eight. You must have whined for a long time to get that."

"Yes, but Sandy Stern had the huge sixty-four box." Kara gave a crooked smile. "And she never let me forget it either."

"You can only color with one at a time, Kara," Lena said in a motherly voice.

"Have you ever tried holding a handful and scribbling them all on the paper at once? It makes a big rainbow."

"Rainbow, huh?" Lena smiled.

"Yeah. Every lesbian has to be able to make a rainbow on their paper in first grade," Kara advised with a knowing smile.

"And what if they can't?" Lena teased. "What happens? Do they lose their membership card?"

"No. They have to wear hair ribbons until they can."

"I wore hair ribbons until high school," Lena declared.

"I bet you did," Kara smiled. "What color? Green?"

"I had a shoebox full of them. I had a different colored bow for every outfit. My mom made them. She bought a big package of plain hairpins and then yards and yards of ribbon to make the bows. She made small and big ones - you pick, and I had a hair bow to match." Lena chuckled at the memory. "You didn't have hair ribbons?"

"If I did, I'd rather not remember," Kara frowned.

"Maybe you look lovely with blue ribbons in your hair," Lena teased, pulling strands of Kara's hair.

"Stop that," Kara grimaced, trying to act all tough.

"And curls. I bet you had lots of curls, beautiful bouncy curls all over."

"And I hated them. Naturally curly hair and a cowboy hat are mortal enemies."

"I love your hair. Blond and wavy at the ends, the first time I had it, I thought you styled it, but now I know it's just its own nature. What else could anyone want?" Lena smoothed some of Kara's hair that cascaded like a curtain on her side. "Were you able to draw a rainbow at a very young age?"

"If you mean how young I was when I knew I was a lesbian, I think I always knew, but it wasn't until I was fifteen or so that I really knew. And you?"

"I bloomed late. I didn't realize what the funny feelings meant until I was in college," Lena recounted.

"How did you find out?" Kara asked, running her hands through her hair to discourage the curls Lena had put there.

"I had a roommate who was gorgeous. She was tall and had beautiful skin and a figure to die for. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I almost flunked the first semester because I spent more time with her than on my studies."

"Was she gay?" Kara asked.

"Heavens, no. She dated the football team captain and was the freshman homecoming queen. She was always sneaking guys into the dorm after hours and telling me to go sleep in the lounge. Like a fool, I did it, thinking she'd like me if I agreed. It was her who flunked out after just one semester. It's a good thing. I almost lost my scholarship because of those swinging hips. That's what I called them. She definitely could swing what her mama gave her. It was she who opened my eyes to my gender identity."

"She sounds like my kind of woman," Kara joked, flashing a big smile. "What's her phone number?"

"I told you, she wasn't a lesbian," Lena replied.

"Maybe not yet, but you know what they say. We're always recruiting."

"Kara," Lena teased.

"You're right. She'd probably be more trouble than she's worth." Kara winked.

"Who was your first?" Lena ventured diplomatically.

"Yeah," Kara replied with a small smile. "I wondered if you knew."

"I'm just guessing."

"Lexie always knew she was gay. I think she had her first date with a woman when she was fourteen. She's a good cowgirl. She knows everything there is to know about calving. She's saved a lot of calves for us. She helps me decide which bulls to keep."

"She likes you," Lena offered. "I mean, she sure seems concerned about your legs."

"She's always been there for me. She's fifteen years older, but she understands a lot about me. I can talk to her about anything. We think of each other like sisters."

"She's tough on the outside, but I bet she's like a big teddy bear on the inside."

"I'll have to tell her that," Kara laughed. "She thinks she's got the whole tough Texan thing going for her."

"You too, the Texan tough gal," Lena said, looking at Kara.

"No, not me," she replied, lowering her gaze while blushing.

"You still haven't answered my question," Lena said.

"What question?"

"Who was your first?" Lena asked.

"Andrea Rojas." Kara threw her head back and laughed.

"Okay, let's hear it," Lena announced, pulling up a chair and staring at Kara.

"You don't want to hear this," Kara replied with a grimace.

"Of course I do. After all, I helped you put on and take off a bedpan. There can be no secrets between a nurse and her patient," Lena added, giving Kara a playful nudge.

"Just remember, you asked. Well, Andrea was several years older than me. She lived in Federal. Her father had a goat ranch, and she drove an old jeep, one of those old army surplus ones. They used it on the ranch to round up the goats. On weekends, she would drive out to Gilbert's Crossing. It's a stone bridge over the river, about fifteen miles south of Harland. She would bring a blanket, hang her clothes on the bumper, and sunbathe by the river. Sometimes, the river was high enough that you could jump off the bridge. There were signs saying it was against the law to jump, but nobody paid attention to them. The signs were used as coat hangers while people swam naked. Well, this Saturday afternoon was scorching hot. I didn't go down there often, but it had rained, and the river was deep enough to swim, so I decided to go. I had to finish my chores first, so when I got there, all the other kids had already left. I was hot and dirty, so I stripped down and jumped in. It was so refreshing. I was floating when I looked up and saw this face staring at me from the bridge. It was Andrea Lya Rojas. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Of course, I was only sixteen. My experiences were pretty limited. Andrea asked if I minded if she joined me. She was sweaty and had driven all the way from Federal, a good sixty miles away, so I said yes."

"Were you naked?" Lena asked.

"No, I was in my underwear. I was on my period, so I figured I'd better keep them on. I have no idea why. The water was filthy, all green-brown. How we avoided getting sick is a mystery. So, Andrea disappeared behind a tree. The next thing I knew, this tanned body was jumping right next to me. She had long legs that didn't stop, and the biggest bush I had ever seen. She was kind of flat-chested, but at that age, I wasn't sure where my preferences were when it came to the female body. Anyway, she came up behind me and bumped into me. She said it was accidental, but I didn't mind. For whatever reason, she touched my butt, and I was on fire." Kara gave a crooked smile.

"What happened next?"

"Are you sure you want to hear this?" Kara was surprised at herself for admitting so much about a topic she didn't usually talk about. She wasn't the type to kiss and tell.

"Come on, you can't stop now. I have to hear what Andrea Lya did with her flat chest and thick bush," Lena laughed.

"Let's see. Where was I? Oh yeah. Andrea and I swam for a while, you know. Small talk about

where we lived, what our parents did, what kind of music we liked, stuff like that. I was going to be a junior in high school. She dropped out of high school. That was about all we had in common. Besides that, we couldn't take our eyes off each other's chests."

"And yours are very nice," Lena teased

"Mine aren't big, but Andrea's two together don't make one of mine. In fact, when I think about it, I got ripped off," Kara laughed.

"Go on."

"Well, I had never been with a woman before. I had never been with anyone before. I had watched the bulls mount the cows and knew what was supposed to happen between a boy and a girl, but with a woman, I had no idea. I thought maybe we should just kiss and see."

Lena laughed hysterically.

"Soon, I found out that Andrea knew a lot more than I did. She used the excuse that she wanted to show me her necklace to get really close to me. It was a small necklace, so I practically had to touch her to see it. I think she had used that trick before. Anyway, I swam and looked. While I was looking at the necklace, her hands were on my back. I could feel them sliding towards my butt. The more her hands slid, the more I studied the necklace. I was examining that thing like a jeweler examining a rare diamond. I could hardly wait for her hands to grab my butt. My nipples were pressed against hers, and I could barely breathe. Finally, her hands were cupped around my butt, and I felt something inside me start to burn like a red-hot iron. I had no idea what it was. Then Andrea started pulling down my panties. Her nails slid down my butt and made me moan like a heifer in heat. I didn't know what I should do. So, like an idiot, I kept examining the necklace. It was a gold heart with a red stone in the middle. I could see that little red chip in my sleep for weeks after that."

"Alright, alright. So, she pulled down your panties. Then what?" Lena was laughing.

"That pair of Fruit of the Loom went down the river and is probably somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico, carried to some deserted tropical beach. As for me, I was being held by Andrea's skillful hands, her amazing bush pressed against mine, rubbing everything worth rubbing. She was kissing my neck and pushing her breasts, tiny as they were, against mine. Well, needless to say, my nipples were harder than acorns. Then," Kara declared, waving her hands in the air as if announcing something important, "then Andrea did that. She kissed me right on the mouth. She put her tongue in my mouth and left me weak in the knees."

"And?" Lena insisted, eager to hear more.

Kara lowered her gaze and laughed shyly.

"That's pretty much it. Before she could do anything else, I had my first orgasm right there in the river with Andrea Lya's tongue in my mouth and her hands on my butt. It happened so fast that I don't know what hit me. She had to hold me up. I think I broke the chain of her necklace because suddenly, something gold disappeared downstream."

Lena laughed behind her hand.

"Is that it?" she asked.

"Yeah. First times are always the best," Kara laughed, but for a strange moment, she felt like she had been unfaithful to Lena. It had been years, and she hadn't seen Andrea Rojas since then, but somehow Kara wished she hadn't allowed Andrea Lya to touch her, not with Lena Luthor waiting

for her in the future.

"Now don't laugh, but at sixteen, I probably still thought you could get pregnant from kissing."

"You're kidding," Kara pondered. "From kissing? What did you think the guy was doing with his equipment? Exercising?"

"I had no idea. I had never seen a man's equipment until I got to college." Now it was Lena's turn to blush.

"You blushed the first time you saw one?" Kara laughed.

"I didn't blush, but I dropped a pot full of hot water on the floor. I started my nursing training in the last year of college while finishing my fine arts degree. I was supposed to give my first bed bath for a grade, and I thought my patient was a woman. When I opened the curtain, that fat and hairy man was lying there - and I mean hairy. He wasn't even wearing the hospital gown. He threw the sheet away and just smiled at me." Lena shook her head at the memory.

"Now, that's a crude image, for sure."

"No kidding. But I did it. It took a while, and I'm sure I was red as a beet from embarrassment, but I gave him a bath. I mean, a bath everywhere. My instructor was there, and she was watching me. I knew I wouldn't pass her class if I didn't do it right."

"Did the patient cooperate?"

"He wasn't a patient. I found out later that he was an orderly the professor had tricked into doing it. I was so mad. He never let me live it down." Lena rolled her eyes and went back to emptying the boxes.

"How about your first time?" Kara asked cautiously. "I told you mine. Now tell me yours."

"I don't think so," Lena raised an eyebrow at her.

"That's not fair. I've already told you what I did with Andrea."

"That's different," Lena said, keeping her eyes on the box's contents.

"No, it's not."

The phone rang in the other room, bringing a look of relief to Lena's face.

"I'll get it," she said, going to answer it.

"Timing is everything," Kara shouted after her, wheeling her chair out of the door.

"I wouldn't have told you anyway," Lena teased, smiling back at her.

"Someday you will," Kara whispered to herself.

Chapter 16

Lena turned off the lights in the room and went to bed. Kara had already been put to bed, and Lena spent a few minutes putting the finishing touches on one of her sketches. Before heading upstairs, she peeked into Kara's room to see if she needed anything, the hallway light casting a dim glow into the room. She could see Kara sitting up stiffly in bed, shifting her shoulders one after the other.

"What are you doing?" Lena asked with a laugh. "Are you doing the shimmy?"

"I'm trying to adjust the lump in my pillow," Kara replied, grimacing with determination.

"Here, let me smooth it out for you."

"No, don't do that." Kara leaned back, guarding the pillow from being fluffed.

Lena placed her hand on her hip and frowned amid her laughter.

"Why not? That's my job. I'm a certified and qualified pillow fluffer."

"And a very good one at that." Kara resumed rubbing her back against the lump. "But my pillow is personal. No one removes lumps from my pillow unless I say so."

"Oh, really?"

"You bet. You don't understand the relationship between a person and the tip of the pillow."

Lena raised an eyebrow at Kara.

"I don't recall you rubbing the edge of the pillow on the doctor's orders."

"If it wasn't there, it should have been."

"Would you like some alone time with your pillow's summit?" Lena teased.

"No. It's not doing anything for me anyway." Kara reached out and squeezed the pillow between her shoulder blades, then resumed rubbing against it.

"Kara, what's wrong? Is your back hurting? Do you need me to rub it?" Lena stood beside the bed, reaching for Kara's shoulders.

"It doesn't hurt," she replied, adjusting it again. "It just itches like crazy." Kara gritted her teeth as she worked to relieve the itch.

"Why didn't you say so?" Lena pulled Kara forward. "Let me see."

"I can handle it," Kara argued, shrugging her shoulders.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. You can take care of yourself, but let me see where it's itching, or I'll tie you down." Lena lifted the back of Kara's shirt. "I don't see anything."

"Well, it's itching anyway, so move so I can rub it," Kara said eagerly.

"Where?" Lena ran her hand along Kara's back.

"In the middle."

"Here?"

"Lower. Yes, right there." Kara gasped, sucking in air as Lena's nails found the spot that was driving her crazy.

"Here?" Lena asked, scratching carefully.

"Harder. Itches, itches, itches," Kara said, closing her eyes and sighing in satisfaction. "Yes. A lot of that."

Lena continued to scratch as Kara's muscles relaxed in pure pleasure.

"Yes, oh yes," Kara moaned as if she were having an orgasm. "I hate to say it, Lena, but you're better than a pillow."

"I won't tell anyone," Lena replied with a chuckle. She gave one last scratch and patted Kara's back. "How about that?"

"Wow," Kara replied as she sighed and smiled at Lena. "You're hired."

"I thought I already was." Lena pulled Kara's shirt down at the back and adjusted the sheet.

"That was for medical reasons. This is for pure pleasure." Kara reached out and kissed each of Lena's fingertips.

"So, should I not trim my nails?"

"Keep them long. Job security." Kara took one of Lena's hands and examined her nails. "They're perfect."

"Maybe I should add that to my resume," Lena said, smoothing a stray strand of Kara's hair.

"Don't do that. I don't want anyone else knowing you're an excellent scratcher. You never know when some pervert might hire you and expect you to scratch their back for reasons other than an itch."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. People expect all sorts of things from nails." Kara gently sat Lena on the bed next to her, still holding her hand.

"They didn't tell me that in nursing school." Lena was lost in Kara's big blue eyes. For the first time since she came to take care of Kara, she felt the nurse inside her waiting outside as the woman inside her looked into Kara's soul.

"Maybe you should go back for a refresher course," Kara whispered as she brought Lena's hand to her lips and kissed each fingertip.

"I'd like that," Lena replied dreamily. "Yes, I'd definitely like that."

Kara pulled her closer, their faces just inches apart.

"There might be long hours and a lot of homework," Kara added as her lips pressed against Lena's forehead.

"I'm sure it'll be worth it," she whispered. "Put me in your hands."

"Absolutely," Kara said just above a hush, then she pulled Lena into her arms and kissed her. It was a long and wonderful kiss that curled Lena's toes and left her yearning for more. Kara tightened her embrace, their mouths hungry for each other's taste.

"Should we be doing this?" Lena murmured as Kara trailed kisses down her neck.

"Absolutely," Kara replied as she moved to the other side.

"But your legs." Lena's eyes closed as Kara's kisses swept her neck.

"Forget my legs." Kara replied, unbuttoning Lena's blouse.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I promise. You won't hurt me, Lena." Kara kissed her again, pulling her onto the bed with her.

Lena tried to pull away from Kara's chest, but the enticing touch of her lips made it hard not to throw herself onto Kara and demand more. She sighed as Kara licked and explored the skin between her breasts.

"Relax," Kara whispered as she finished unbuttoning Lena's blouse, exposing her bra.

"I am," Lena murmured as she forced herself to breathe. As the woman inside her came to life, it became increasingly difficult for her to avoid stumbling over Kara.

"Put your arms here," Kara said, positioning her arms on the pillow.

"I can't. I'll fall on top of you."

"I want that," Kara insisted. "I want to feel you against me."

"No, I shouldn't." Lena looked at Kara with her nurse's eyes.

"Shh," Kara replied, pressing her fingertips against Lena's lips. "Don't talk like a nurse tonight. Tonight you're just Lena, and it's just me who wants to touch you."

"Shouldn't we wait?" Lena asked breathlessly as Kara cupped one of her breasts, feeling the lace-covered nipple hardening beneath her touch.

"I can hardly wait." Kara kissed Lena softly.

Lena's mind was a whirlwind of emotions. The nurse inside her was screaming to stop, saying that Kara was a patient, a convalescent patient under her care. This was as unorthodox as it could be for a nurse, not to mention that Kara's legs were still fragile. She shouldn't do anything that could jeopardize her recovery. But the woman inside her wanted Kara's touch. She craved it. She needed it more than she cared to admit. There was a softness to this hardworking, tough woman that intrigued her. It was an attraction Lena couldn't ignore. Whether it was for her vulnerability, courage, or impulsive independence, Kara held the key to the night they had spent together, and Lena desperately wanted her to unlock the door. Lena couldn't fight her desire any longer. She was ready for Kara, and, moreover, she needed her. From that first look into the brightest blue eyes that ever set foot in the Rainbow Desert, Lena knew she wanted this moment to happen.

"Do you really want me to wait?" Kara spoke so softly that it felt like a summer breeze flowing over Lena's body.

"No," Lena replied, lowering herself onto Kara's breasts. "I don't want to wait. I can't." Lena pressed her lips to Kara's, kissing her urgently, demanding Kara's tongue in her mouth. Lena lay beside Kara, seeking a position that was comfortable but allowed them to touch and kiss without pressing Kara's legs. Finally, Kara threw the sheet back and guided Lena to sit on her lap, straddling her hips. She pulled Lena's blouse off her shoulders. Kara reached out and released Lena's bra with a quick movement, pulling the straps down and exposing Lena's breasts with their small, pale nipples. Kara held them in her hands, feeling them harden as she massaged them in her palms. Lena arched her back as she felt her body tingle, waves of shivers covering her skin.

"You have the most incredible skin," Kara said, gazing at Lena and caressing her gently.

Lena sighed deeply, a sigh that was a gentle surrender to Kara's touch.

"I could spend the whole night touching you like this," Kara whispered.

"Am I too heavy for you?" Lena asked, holding Kara's hands against her eager breasts.

"No, never," Kara replied, sitting up and taking one of Lena's breasts into her mouth.

Lena moaned as Kara's tongue flicked and teased the nipple until it stood at full attention. Lena cradled Kara's head in her arms as an arrow of electricity ran through her body. She desperately wanted to close her legs as her femininity pulsed, but she was mounted on Kara, whose relentless touch was enough to make her scream.

"Kara, you have to stop," she gasped. But Kara didn't stop. She moved to the other breast, pulling the nipple with playful bites and pinches. Lena's body stiffened, and her thighs flexed as Kara teased a new wave of tingling between her legs. Kara released the button of Lena's shorts and unzipped them. She slid her hand inside, placing her fingers over Lena's damp panties. Lena pulled Kara closer against her chest as her body spasmed. Her legs contracted and pressed against Kara's hips as the hot wave of passion took control of her every movement. Kara could feel Lena's urgency and pushed her panties down, curling her fingers around her mound and grasping the mound between her fingers. Lena responded with deep guttural sighs as she rocked to the rhythm of Kara's thrusts.

"Don't stop. Please, don't stop," Lena said without thinking as her abdomen contracted and her legs stiffened, squeezing Kara like a vice. Kara didn't stop but plunged her fingers deeper into Lena's sweetness. With slow but deliberate thrusts, Kara delved deeper, feeling Lena's contractions. Lena couldn't speak. Her heart was racing, and her body shuddered as wave after wave built from within only to burst into a fiery explosion. Kara felt Lena close around her fingers as she continued to move in and out. Lena gave a great shudder that started at her toes and traveled up her body until every muscle flexed and relaxed. Sweat glistened on her skin as she clung to Kara, panting.!

Kara held her in her arms as she rode the last waves of her orgasm, then leaned back on the pillow, pulling Lena down on top of her. Lena rested her cheek against Kara's chest, listening to her heart. It was beating as strongly as her own, and it was a comforting feeling. They stayed embraced for a long time, Lena nestled against Kara as she stroked her back.

Kara sighed and closed her eyes as she held Lena in her arms. Something wonderful had happened. Lena had entered her life and filled a void, a void Kara thought would never be filled. Until now, she had been content with lust-driven one-night stands that came and went from her world. But she couldn't deny it. Lena was different. She was special. Lena's body could ignite a fire within Kara with just a toss of her silky raven hair. Even the sight of Lena dozing with Picasso in her lap brought a smile to Kara's face. As surprising as it was, Kara knew she would never again look at love and commitment in such a casual way. She wanted her arms around Lena, protecting her and keeping her safe. She wanted Lena to find comfort in her arms and trust her for everything she

needed.

"I can't wait for these casts to come off," Kara sighed, kissing Lena gently.

"I know, darling. Neither can I."

Chapter 17



Days passed, and Lena tried to ignore what had happened between them and not let it spiral out of control, but it was difficult. Kara's smile and gentle gaze followed her everywhere. As much as Lena's professionalism conflicted with her emotions during that passionate night, it was clear that Kara didn't have that internal turmoil. She couldn't be happier with what they had shared.

"Lexie called," Lena reported, poking her head into the bathroom where Kara was finishing her sink bath. "She said she's fixing a fence not far from here and would swing by around ten to feed Coal and check his hooves."

"Okay, good."

Kara pulled her T-shirt over her head and slid it down over her thighs. "I'll sure be happy when I can wear all of my clothes again, not just the tops."

"I know." Lena smiled and helped guide the wheelchair through the door. "But you have a nice butt, so don't be embarrassed."

"Hey, I'm not embarrassed. My butt gets cold." Kara spun the wheels forcefully and wheeled herself to the door. She headed for the dining room and sat down facing the kitchen, waiting for Lexie's arrival.

"Do you need anything before I go take my shower? I need to wash my hair," Lena asked.

Kara just smiled at her. "Behave," Lena said as she started to climb the stairs.

Kara grinned to herself, pleased with the mental image of water droplets running down Lena's smooth skin. Although she was eager for Lexie to come take care of Coal, a job she desperately wished she could do herself, Kara hoped that Lena would finish her shower first. Something deep down hungered for a kiss and a few minutes of her warm touch.

"Anyone here?" Lexie called from the back door.

"Come in," Kara replied, making sure she was discreetly covered.

Lexie was the most modest person Kara had ever met. She blushed when one of the ranch hands came out from behind a tree, forgetting to zip up. She absolutely couldn't function if she thought her jeans weren't pulled up behind, covering her cleavage while she sat in the saddle.

"Hey, boy. You're looking pretty," she approached and shook Kara's hand, giving her a hearty pat on the back. Lexie didn't hug. It wasn't in her nature.

"How are things going? Have all the orders been shipped?" Kara was eager for news about the ranch. Her sense of isolation was growing, even though she spoke to her father every day.

"Yeah, your dad and J'onn have everything under control." Lexie sat on the arm of the couch, her cowboy hat in hand as she caught Kara up on ranch news. She was wearing her leather chaps and silver spurs that jingled with every step. She looked like she had already put in a long, hard day's work, with her boots and chaps covered in a fine layer of dust.

Lena came downstairs bouncing, drying her hair with a towel and humming. She was dressed in a pair of snug jeans and a sleeveless shirt tied in a knot at her waist.

"Hi, Lexie," Lena said.

"Hey, Lena," Lexie replied, her eyes instantly finding the opening in her shirt where two buttons were unfastened.

Kara noticed too, her eyes fixed on the exposed neckline. Lena continued to towel dry her hair with one hand while subtly buttoning her shirt with the other. She noticed Kara's hungry gaze and wondered if she would have buttoned her shirt if Lexie hadn't been there.

"Did you bring Coal's horseshoes?" Kara asked, needing to change the subject.

"Yeah. I'll take care of him for you," Lexie replied, looking at Kara. Lexie saw something in the way Kara and Lena glanced at each other that brought a smile to her face. "Tell me what you want to be done."

"Let's," Kara said, wheeling her chair toward the back door as if taking purposeful, confident steps. Lexie followed, listening to Kara's instructions.

"Kara, you stay on the porch, you hear me?" Lena called as she headed upstairs to brush her hair. "I don't want those casts covered in dirt."

"Yes, ma'am," Kara teased.

Lexie chuckled and playfully nudged Kara.

"She sure has your number, doesn't she?" Lexie teased, opening the door for Kara and helping her through.

Kara had to admit that Lena could read her like a book. It gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling to know that Lena cared.

"Make sure to check Coal's teeth. I haven't done that in weeks. And pinch him to see if he's well-hydrated," Kara instructed.

"Kara," Lexie interrupted, putting on her cowboy hat and adjusting it. "I know how to take care of a horse." She gave Kara a friendly slap on the shoulder and headed for the barn, her spurs jingling as she walked.

"Kara, you're half horse yourself," Lena joked.

"I'm starting to see that. And stubborn, too," Lena observed the horse uneasily.

"Lexie will saddle and ride him a bit. He needs the exercise," Kara said, shifting the topic.

Kara ran to the corner of the porch closest to the corral and eagerly awaited Lexie and Coal's arrival. It felt like long and agonizing minutes.

"Is everything all right?" she shouted when they didn't appear fast enough to satisfy her curiosity.

Finally, Coal trotted out of the barn and circled the corral, swishing his tail proudly behind him. He took several laps around the enclosure, tossing his head as if he knew Kara was watching. Lexie walked out to the middle of the corral with a bucket of tools and waited for the stallion to satisfy his need to play. Kara watched closely, examining every move they made. When Lexie finished, she returned the tools to the barn and fetched a blanket and a pair of reins for Coal. She opened the corral gate and led Coal toward the porch. As they got closer, Kara's eyes grew brighter and wider. She smiled openly as the Appaloosa approached, the muscles of his sleek body rippling in the Texas sun. Lexie handed the reins to Kara, knowing she needed to touch her horse.

"Hey, Coal," Kara said, her smile so wide that it squeezed a tear from each eye. She cleared her throat and blinked them away as she stroked his long nose and scratched his chin. He remained absolutely still as she cradled his head in her arms, rubbing her face against his. "I wish I could ride you, boy. But I can't. Not yet. But soon. We just have to be patient."

Lexie watched, the moment touching even her tough exterior. She adjusted her hat, pulling the front down to shade her eyes, even though they were in the shade.

"Do you want me to saddle him and ride him a bit?" Lexie asked, feeling sorry for Kara and her horse. Offering to ride him seemed like the best way to help.

Kara wiped her eyes and forced a warm smile.

"Yes, that would be great. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Coal?" She ran her fingers through his forelock.

"You two found a way for Kara to play with her horse," Lena said, coming out to the back porch. She stood behind Kara's wheelchair, her hands on Kara's shoulders.

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"Kara herself is half horse," Lexie joked.

"I'm starting to see that. And stubborn too," Lena observed the horse warily.

"Lexie is going to ride him. He needs the exercise," Kara handed the reins back to Lexie and patted Coal.

"I'll bring the saddle here. You hold him," Lexie pushed the reins back to Kara and headed to the tack room.

"Come touch him, Lena," Kara suggested gently. "He'll let you give him a little pat on the face. It's very soft here." She demonstrated.

"Alright," Lena replied, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Lena, seriously. He might be big, but he's very gentle."

"Kara, you play with him. I have things to do inside." Lena turned to open the door.

"Wait," Kara said, grabbing her hand. "Are you still afraid of horses?"

"No," she replied hesitantly. "I'm not afraid of them. I just don't love them like you do."

"Is it because of what your father did when you were a child?"

Lena didn't answer. She stared at Coal, mesmerized by his size. Her mind was elsewhere and in another time.

"Just touch him. I promise he won't hurt you," Kara spoke softly, trying to reassure Lena's

hesitation.

"But..." Lena stopped, her eyes widening as Kara slowly pulled her towards the horse.

"I won't force you. All you need to do is reach out and touch his nose. It feels like velvet." Kara eased her grip on the reins and lowered Coal's head to make him seem less overwhelming. She stroked his nose to show Lena how to do it. "Like this."

Lena slowly reached out to his nose, her body tense with fear.

"Good boy," Kara cooed, keeping Coal calm as Lena's hand got closer. She finally extended two fingers and touched the soft skin between his nostrils. He snorted, flaring his nostrils and making her pull her hand away. "That's it. Try again. He does that because it tickles."

"Oh, great. You've made me tickle a horse. He won't like me at all."

"Of course, he will. He only does that every now and then. He's not as sensitive as I am."

Lena tried again, this time applying her whole hand to his long snout. She gave a few awkward pats, keeping her arm extended and her body far back.

"Okay, I did it. Can I go inside now?"

"No. Actually, I need you to hold this for a moment." Kara handed her the reins.

"I can't do this, Kara," she said, her eyes widening again. "I can't hold him."

"Please, just for a minute. I need to move a bit. I'm getting stiff."

"Kara, you can't expect me to hold him," Lena argued, pulling back.

"What if I'm pinching a nerve or something?" Kara replied, still holding the reins out for her to take.

"Oh, man," she gasped, grabbing the reins' end with two fingers. "I don't know how to do this."

"It's okay like this," Kara said, letting go of the reins and shifting her weight. She lifted herself up by her arms a few times to find a comfortable position. When she was done, which she extended as long as possible, Lena held the reins with one hand and let them rest by her side.

"Do you need help?" Lena asked.

"I got it. How's it going?" She looked at Lena but didn't take the reins back from her.

"Here we go," Lexie called, carrying a saddle over her shoulder. "Thought I'd never find the blanket." She dropped the saddle on the ground and placed the blanket on Coal's back. He remained absolutely still, just as Kara had trained him to do. Kara watched, her eyes assisting with every movement. She could saddle a horse in her sleep, but seeing someone else do it was difficult. She wanted to be the one putting the heavy saddle on his back and cinching it up. She wanted to be the one stepping into the stirrup and swinging her leg over the saddle, hearing the leather creak under her weight. She wanted to be the one pressing her knees against his flanks and urging him into a smooth trot. But that wasn't happening. It was Lexie who felt the saddle and Coal's broad back against her jeans. And that's why Kara was consumed with uncontrollable jealousy. It lasted only a moment, but Lena could see it in her eyes. Lena patted Kara's arm, rubbing it gently as they watched Lexie step onto Coal and lead him into the pasture.

"I'll be back in a bit," Lexie called, tugging her hat down tight. She sat comfortably in the saddle as Coal eagerly trotted towards the open spaces beyond the corral. He seemed eager for the ride.

"He's a beautiful horse, Kara. I have to give you that," Lena observed as they moved effortlessly across the field.

Kara didn't respond, holding her emotions tightly. She squinted at the morning sun as if that could hide her trembling chin. Lena knelt beside her wheelchair and smiled gently at her.

"Soon, darling, soon," she said, touching Kara's face. "I can see you up there. I bet you look so good in jeans and leather," she added with a wink.

Kara laughed, looking at her.

"Not as good as you, I bet," Kara replied.

"I'm not exactly the cowgirl type."

"I'm sorry, but I really hate Lion for what he did to you. I wish he had never put you on a horse like that. All he did was take you away from a wonderful experience. Riding a horse can be so peaceful, even if all you do is walk around the backyard. It gives you a sense of independence and freedom that you can't get behind the wheel of a car." Kara turned her gaze to the pasture where Lexie and Coal were trotting on the horizon. "The power of a horse is something to admire. And when you're sitting on their backs, it's like riding on a pair of wings. They share their power with you."

"I'm sorry too," Lena said, also watching the horse and rider. "I wish I hadn't been a disappointment to you. I know how much horses and cattle are a part of your life."

Kara instantly gave her a stern look.

"You are not a disappointment to me, Lena. Never think that. I don't care if you ride a horse or sit in a rocking chair, you would never be a disappointment to me." She squeezed Lena's hand firmly. "Yes, I love animals. But that's not all I love." Her voice suddenly softened. "I love you too."

Lena looked at her with wide eyes, surprised by Kara's confession.

"You heard me," Kara continued. "I love you."

"Oh, Kara," Lena choked up.

"Did I say something I shouldn't have?"

"No, it's just..." Lena looked away.

"I did. I said something wrong." Kara's face grew embarrassed.

"No, you didn't. I'm very flattered. I truly am. Thank you."

"But?"

Lena lowered her gaze as if trying to decide how to explain.

"You're in love with someone else. Is that it?" Kara stated firmly. "Is it Sydney?"

"Kara, it's not uncommon for patients to fall in love with their caregivers, especially when the required assistance is of such an intimate nature," Lena assumed a clinical tone. "I should have never allowed what happened the other night to occur. That was the last thing I should have done."

I'm a nurse, I should have known better. But you caught me in a moment of weakness." Lena gave a gentle smile. "But that doesn't excuse what I did. I'm sorry, Kara. I should have never let you make love to me."

"Are you saying you don't love me?" Kara looked at Lena with hopeful eyes, begging Lena to confess that she really loved her.

"Please, Kara," Lena said, standing up, putting space between her and Kara's touch. "I was wrong. I blame myself."

"Lena," Kara interrupted and reached out to her.

"Forgive me," Lena said, then rushed towards the back door.

Kara wheeled her wheelchair and blocked the door.

"Lena, please don't run away from me. You know I can't chase after you. Talk to me." Kara touched Lena's arm. "I should be the one to apologize if I said something you didn't want to hear. I didn't mean to rush you. I understand that it came out of nowhere and you weren't prepared for me to say that. You're not ready. Believe me, I understand."

Lena turned to Kara and looked into her eyes, reading her guilt and apologies. Lena's eyes looked beyond Kara, and suddenly widened.

"Kara, look," she gasped, pointing at the horse wandering through the yard, dragging the reins. It was a small pony with black saddle and bridle. He seemed content to graze in the grass beside the porch, unaware that he wasn't tied to anything.

"Hey, Tum," Kara called, giving a whistle. The horse looked at her and then went back to munching on the grass. "Lexie didn't tie him to the fence," she chuckled.

"Is he going to run away?" Lena asked anxiously.

"No. Tumbleweed Danvers only goes where there's grass. He's too old to run away."

"Should I call Lexie to come back and get him?"

"He'll be fine. Hey, Tum," Kara called again and whistled when he didn't respond to Lena's words. He finally looked up, his ears perking up and his nostrils sniffing the wind. "Come on, Tum."

"Here, Tum," Lena insisted, her eyes wide as saucers. He tried to shake his head but had stepped on the reins. "Oh, Kara. He's going to hurt himself."

"No, he's fine. Call him and wave the carrot. He'll come to you."

Lena waved the carrot to him, and he walked toward her, his nose twitching, eager to taste.

"Tum, no. Not so fast. Stop. Kara, what do I say?"

"Tum, stand still," Kara gave the command, and the horse immediately stopped, his nose still sniffing the scent of the carrot.

"I forgot what to say," Lena said, once again holding the carrot out to him. "How can we start over?"

"Tum, come here," she said and then whistled.

He continued toward Lena and the carrot, her expression growing more terrified as he approached.

"Tum, stand still," Lena ordered, her voice trembling but firm.

"Good," Kara said with a smile.

Once Lena was relieved that he had stopped and she was ready, she called to him again. It took three times, but finally, Tum was close enough to nibble on the end of the carrot.

"Now, walk with him to the rail," Kara said. "Lead him back."

Lena took a step back, and Tum followed, chewing on the carrot with his teeth.

"He's eating too fast," she said, holding it with two fingers.

"Let him have it," Kara advised. "Now take the reins and tie them to the post."

"Oh, Kara, I'm not so sure about that," Lena said as she crouched down and grabbed the reins. She missed on her first attempt but finally got a hold of them. She quickly wrapped them around the post and stepped back. She hadn't been breathing for over a minute, and her face was pale.

"Good job," Kara declared cheerfully.

"He's not as big as Coal, is he?"

"No. He's only fourteen and a half hands."

"How big is Coal?"

"He's about sixteen and a half or seventeen hands. He's a big boy," Kara acknowledged.

"Yes, Coal is a big horse. That's for sure."

"I like tall horses. It allows me to see over the herd. Many cowboys prefer tall horses. It's easier to keep things under control."

"Maybe that's why I have a cat," Lena joked.

"Perhaps you should have started with a smaller horse."

"Maybe so. My father's horse was a giant. At least when I was a child, I thought he was."

"Tum is a bit small for a ranch pony, but he's so good-natured that we hate to give him up. Lexie is using him until Patsy's foal is weaned."

"Amarillo?" Lena asked.

"Yes."

"That's the cutest little foal I've ever seen," Lena said fondly as she remembered the tiny animal.

"I'm sure Lexie will be happy to show her off whenever you want to see her. You'd think she was a grandmother or something," Kara laughed, looking out into the field for signs of Coal and Lexie. They had disappeared from sight.

"Should I get another carrot for Tum, or maybe an apple?"

"No, he's too fat. Maybe you can put some water in a bucket for him."

"All right," Lena said, going to fill a plastic bucket.

"Not too much. He'll bloat. About a third of a bucket is enough."

Lena carried it from the faucet, spilling and splashing water along the way.

"Where do I put it?"

"Right in front of him. He'll find it."

She placed it as close as she dared. Tum tried to sip the water, but his reins were too short.

"He can't reach it. I tied him too tightly," Lena said, realizing he was stretching against the strap.

"Could you hold the reins while he drinks?" Kara asked, reaching out to undo them.

"I guess so," she replied. Lena held the reins while Tum drank. When he finished, he shook his head, shaking the harness, but Lena held on.

"Give him a pat on the neck," Kara suggested. "Then he'll know you're his friend."

Lena awkwardly patted his neck, keeping a safe distance from his curious tongue. As she moved, she didn't realize she was pulling his reins, and he turned with her, circling her. The more she moved, the more he followed, trapping her in a continuous loop.

"Tum, no, wait," she said, pushing back by his side.

Kara laughed so hard that she couldn't stop him from circling her.

"Tum, stop. Stand still, Tum," Lena said frantically.

"He won't stop as long as you're pulling him," Kara managed to say through her laughter. "It looks like you're dancing with him."

"Stop him, Kara," Lena said with a worried frown as she continued to circle.

"Walk in a straight line, Lena. Stop circling."

Lena started walking across the yard, looking over her shoulder as she went. She held the reins to the side, and Tum trailed behind.

"Now turn just a little," Kara said, watching Lena with a smile. "Make a big circle."

Lena did, keeping a brisk pace so as not to feel like she was being invaded.

"What now?" she asked, keeping an eye on Tum and another on where she was going.

"If you want to stop, say 'stand' at the same time you stop walking."

"Tum, stand still," Lena ordered and stopped in her tracks. The horse stopped and looked at her. "Hey, he did it." Lena smiled at Kara.

"What will you do now?" Kara asked as if she were a teacher.

"Tum, come here," she said, whistling as she began to walk again. "How about this?"

"Try turning to the other side."

Lena soon had Tum following her in figure eights and circles all around the yard, proudly displaying her newly discovered skill. Kara sat on the porch, praising her efforts and laughing heartily at her enjoyment. Twice Lena stopped and patted Tum's neck, something he graciously allowed without any issues.

"Are you having fun?" Kara asked, noting Lena's wide and satisfied smile.

"Yes, I am. Can you believe I'm actually leading a horse?"

"Next time you stop to pet him, touch his saddle. Grab the saddle horn."

"Why?"

"Just to get a feel for it."

"I know what a saddle is, Kara."

"Okay," Kara acknowledged, not wanting to push her.

Lena looked at Tum's saddle and then at Kara.

"Will he stay still if I touch it?"

"If you command him to, he will."

"Tum, stand still," Lena waited until she was sure he had stopped completely. "Should I drop the reins?"

"No, throw them over his neck. He'll stay there. Come to his left side, Lena," Kara watched closely, leaning forward as if she were ready to run to Lena's side if she needed her. "Give him a pat on the neck and tell him he's a good boy," Kara added calmly.

Lena took a deep breath and carefully passed the reins over Tum's neck. She gave him a pat on his neck, gently stroking it.

"Tum, you're a good boy. Yes, you are. Will you let me touch your beautiful saddle, huh? Yes, Tum. You're a good boy," Lena approached, continuing to stroke his neck with one hand while reaching out and touching the saddle with the other. She crossed her fingers around the saddle, her eyes going back and forth between his neck and the saddle. "Good boy, Tum. Good boy," she murmured, soothing the horse. Tum's back was not much higher than Lena's armpit, so she could see over him, which was already a comfort. She stroked the leather seat, feeling the work and stitching.

"You don't have to keep patting his neck. He knows where you are. He won't move. If he takes a step, just remind him to stand still." Kara's voice was gentle and supportive. "Touch the stirrup, too."

Lena examined the saddle from end to end, touching the stirrup and feeling the leather laces tied to the conchas.

"You're such a good boy, Tum. Yes, you are," Lena warmly murmured.

"Lena," Kara said softly. "He won't move an inch if you want to sit on him. All you need to do is hold the saddle horn and put your foot in the stirrup." She said this carefully and gently, not

wanting it to sound like she had to do it. But Kara wanted Lena to know it would be okay if this were the time to try.

Lena looked at Kara, seeking the confidence she needed to accept the challenge and get on Tum's back.

"It's up to you, baby," Kara added. "You don't have to. But I want you to know he'll let you, and he won't move." Kara knew how difficult this moment was for Lena and what memories were fighting inside her. "I'm here for you, Lena. Right here."

"Oh, Kara," Lena whispered, the fear from her childhood screaming in her ears. "I want to, but..." She looked back at the saddle, her hand petting it like a pet.

"When you're ready, darling," Kara said. "We have all day. He'll stand there as long as you want."

Lena took several deep breaths, gathering her courage and fighting her fears back to the past where they belonged. She desperately wanted to do this. For herself, for her father, and for Kara, she wanted to do this.

"Lexie is taller than me. I won't fit in the stirrups. I won't be able to get my leg over," Lena wasn't sure why she said that. If it was an excuse not to try, she wished she hadn't thought of it. At best, it was a feeble excuse.

"Raise the stirrup and shorten the buckle. It's quite simple to do," Kara explained. "If you can tie me to the elevator, you can shorten a stirrup."

Kara wished she could descend the stairs with her wheelchair and do it for her. Before Kara could explain further, Lena tossed the stirrup over the saddle and made the adjustment, then looked back at Kara as if she were facing the moment of truth, all obstacles conquered.

"What now?" Lena asked, swallowing hard.

"Put your left hand on the saddle horn and your right hand on the back of the saddle," she instructed. Lena did it, her fingers knuckled white from the grip. "Now, just slide your left foot into the stirrup and lift yourself up." Lena hesitated for a long moment. "Don't rush, baby," Kara offered.

"Ready or not, Tum. Here I go. I'm doing this," Lena whispered. She lifted her leg and slipped her foot into the stirrup, standing there for a long second, planning her jump onto the saddle. Suddenly, she did it. She stood in the stirrup while pulling the saddle, then swung her leg over Tum's back, settling into place. She held onto the saddle with both hands, drawing in a long, desperate breath as she stopped. She finally looked at Kara, her face as white as a ghost. Kara smiled proudly, clapping at Lena's accomplishment. Lena slowly sat up straight in the saddle, holding on tightly as a smile grew on her face.

"I did it, Kara. I got up here by myself." Lena laughed. "Wow, I feel like a kid."

"I think it's the bravest thing I've ever seen anyone do, Lena," Kara declared, cheering and clapping.

"I don't know how I'm going to get down, but I'm up here."

"Hold the reins, baby. You'll feel more secure if you hold his reins."

Lena kept one hand on the saddle and held the reins with the other.

"Yeah. Just like that," Kara said, smiling with pride.

"Tum, you're a good, good boy," she said, leaning down and petting him. He hadn't taken a single step.

"Do you trust Tum now?" Kara asked.

"Yes, I do. He's so sweet."

"Do you want him to take a few steps? Remember, you know how to start and stop him."

Lena blew a mouthful of air.

"Wow, I don't know," she said, her voice nervous again.

"He'll do the exact same thing as when you were walking in front of him. He'll stop when you tell him to stand and start when you say..." Kara hesitated, not wanting to say the word that would make him take a step until Lena was ready. Lena looked at her, gripping the reins and the saddle tighter.

"Come on, Tum," Lena said carefully, coaxing him to move. She gave a soft whistle, her mouth too dry to give a loud one. Tum took a step, shaking Lena in the saddle, but she held on, her shoulders hunched forward protectively.

"Alright, Lena. Very good," Kara announced enthusiastically.

Lena couldn't lift her eyes. Her attention was on Tum's swaying head as he moved slowly but steadily across the yard in small, cautious steps. Her legs were locked around his waist, toes pointing inward, pressing into his sides. Lena Luthor looked absolutely terrified, but she was riding a horse, and she had done it all by herself. She adjusted the saddle, climbed onto his back, and urged him forward. No one, not even Lion, could take that moment away from her or diminish its greatness. Kara smiled openly at Lena's courage in doing it all on her own.

"Tum, stand still," Lena said, testing the command to make sure she was still in control. He stopped. She gave a satisfied smile. "Okay, Tum. Come on, let's go," she said, whistling to him.

"If you press your knees into his sides with the command, you won't need the whistle," Kara said.

"I like the whistle." Lena sat up a little straighter and prouder. "You whistle for Coal. I'll whistle for Tum." She smiled at Kara.

Lena walked with Tum around the yard, stopping and starting him a dozen times. Kara instructed her on how to sit and hold her legs in the stirrups to make the ride more comfortable. She wasn't ready to gallop through the countryside, but slowly Lena was able to release the saddle and hold the reins by herself. Kara explained how to nudge the reins against his neck to make him turn and how to guide him with her legs. Tum obeyed, walking at a measured pace like a circus horse around a ring.

"Look." Lena pointed to the pasture gate. "Here comes Lexie and Coal."

"You're fine. Don't get down. Just sit there," Kara advised as Coal trotted through the yard, blowing air through his nostrils and shaking his head against the reins.

"How did he do?" Kara inquired.

"He would like to cross the field," Lexie replied, guiding him to the porch. "He's full of vinegar today. You sure need to get back in the saddle, boy."

"Yeah, I know."

"Look at you," Lexie said, smiling at Lena. "You look pretty smart up there on old Tum."

"He agreed to let me ride him," Lena said confidently.

"I think it's a great idea. Whenever you want to ride, just give me a call, and I'll saddle him up."

Coal's energetic antics caught Tum's attention. He sidestepped, making Lena grab the saddle horn.

"Get up, Tum. Stand up," Lena said in a firm yet gentle voice. He stopped and shook his head.

"That's how it is, Lena," Lexie said with a laugh. "Don't let him get away with that stuff." She waved with respect. "Want me to chase Coal away, Kara?" she asked as Coal shook his head and pranced in a circle, too excited to stand still. Lexie sat in the saddle with the skill of a seasoned rider, allowing him to stomp his foot and express his frustration with the short ride.

"Yeah, that's okay," Kara said. "Behave, Coal. It won't be long."

"I'll be right back." Lexie gave Coal the lead and let him gallop toward the pasture gate, tail and mane blowing in the wind.

"And before you even ask, no, I don't want Tum running around the yard like that," Lena said, watching Coal's lively flight.

"Next time," Kara mused.

Lena guided Tum to the porch and stopped him at the bottom of the stairs.

"Thank you," Lena said affectionately. "You have no idea how much I appreciate what you did for me today. This meant a lot to me."

"I didn't do it, Lena. You did it all. You're the one who got on that horse without anyone's help. I'm very proud of you." Kara reached out and rubbed Tum's nose. "I can't wait for you to tell Lion. He'll be so proud of you too. I'm sure of it."

"I hope so. I really hope so. I'll see him next week. While you're at the doctor's office getting X-rays and getting your cast off, I'll be at the nursing home." Lena's green eyes shone brightly, and she relished her accomplishment.

Chapter 18

"So you think it's a fun thing, don't you?" Kara teased. Lena's satisfied smile for overcoming her fear of horseback riding lasted well into the night.

"Yes, I do," she replied, setting Kara's dinner on the table, then swaying her hips as she walked back to the kitchen. "I rode a horse all by myself and didn't fall off."

"We'll have to get you a cowboy hat and some jeans to wear next time."

"And are you sure there will be a next time?" Lena brought her plate to the table along with a bottle of ketchup.

"Absolutely," Kara said, applying a stripe of ketchup to her fries. "Once you're in the saddle, there's nothing quite like it. Well, almost nothing." She dipped one of her fries and held it up to Lena. "I can think of one or two equally cool things." She winked at Lena.

"And what would that be? Roping a calf?" Lena teased. She opened her mouth and took the fry, then chewed it between her teeth.

"Oh yes. I forgot about calf roping. Three things then," Kara cheerfully agreed.

"Kara!" Lena mocked, giving her a playful scowl. "You're judging me based on calf roping? You should be ashamed."

"We farmers have our priorities, you know," Kara leaned in and puckered her lips, expecting a little peck.

"I won't kiss you until you tell me I'm much, much better than calf roping," Lena responded, acting indignant about it.

"Do you mean I have to make that decision right now? I might need some time to think about it."

"Kara Danvers." Lena looked at her. "You better tell me right this second, or tonight your shot goes straight to your chest. No more gentle shots. I'll yank and stab you, and you won't be able to sit on that butt for a week." Lena glanced at her.

"Okay, let's see here. Lena Luthor. Steer wrestling. Lena Luthor. Steer roping," Kara said, balancing one hand and then the other. "Then there's calf branding. That's pretty cool too." Kara nodded and smiled as she pondered.

"That's it. Stab for you," Lena went back to eating.

"Could I have a day to think about it?" Kara asked with a smile.

"No, you can't. It's too late. You had your chance," Lena took a delicate bite and chewed slowly, rolling her eyes up to the ceiling. "I don't want to discuss it anymore."

"Oh, you don't," Kara joked, reaching out and poking Lena in the ribs, causing her to drop a fry on the floor.

"Stop that," Lena laughed, reaching for the fry, but Picasso got there first. "I'm trying to eat."

"Do you think so?" Kara did it again. This time, Lena hit the edge of the table with her elbow,

jarring her strange bone.

"You better stop or you'll regret it, Kara Danvers," Lena scolded.

"Or what? Are you already planning to stick that needle in the bone? What else could you do? Break my legs?" she teased.

"How about now?" Lena declared, wiggling her fingers in the air above Kara's toes. "How about we play fair? You tickle me. I tickle you." She raised an eyebrow.

"No, Lena. Don't you dare," Kara replied, lifting a stern hand. "That's not allowed, and you know it."

"Oh, it's not?" Lena brought her hands closer to Kara's toes. Kara stiffened and frantically released the wheelchair locks, moving her feet away from Lena's wiggling fingers.

"Lena, don't do this. I'm warning you." Kara rolled backward through the room, bumping into everything in her path. Lena followed, her fingers waving like furious spiders, a devilish look in her eyes.

"Are you challenging me?"

"I didn't challenge you," Kara answered, trying to keep a safe distance between her exposed toes and Lena's wiggling fingers. "I warned you not to do this."

"You did it too. You said, 'Don't you dare.'" Lena closed in on her fingers, and Kara kept the chair moving from side to side to keep her feet out of Lena's agitated reach.

"Lena, this isn't fair. You have me at a disadvantage, and you know it." Kara turned the chair first one way and then the other to keep her feet away from Lena's agitated fingers.

"You tickled me, and I believe in reciprocity. I think I'll start with the right foot." She looked at Kara's toes as they wiggled in mercy. "First the little one. No, I'll do them all at once."

"Lena, don't. I'm telling you. Don't do it." Kara looked genuinely worried, her forehead wrinkled.

"Then the left one, toe by toe," Lena said slowly and diabolically.

"Lena, no. I'm telling you. Don't do it." Kara sounded genuinely concerned, her brow furrowed.

"How about now?" Lena declared, wiggling her fingers in the air above Kara's toes. "How about we play fair? You tickle me. I tickle you." She raised an eyebrow.

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Lena chuckled, sounding like a witch ready to toss a bat's wing in the cauldron. She was being as dramatic as possible, and clearly, the anticipation was more torture for Kara than the tickling itself. Lena grabbed one of Kara's ankle casts, ready to mete out Kara's punishment. But before she could tickle a toe, Kara grabbed the lasso she had left on the floor beside the couch and threw a loop over Lena, securing her arms at her sides.

"Kara!" Lena cried out as she pulled the slack in the rope. "Let me go."

"I don't think so." She laughed triumphantly.

"Release me. I wasn't really going to tickle you," Lena struggled to free herself, but Kara kept a taut line over her.

"I'm not sure I believe you." Kara pulled Lena toward her, slowly closing the distance between them.

Lena finally stopped struggling and allowed herself to be pulled closer.

"You stink, you," she laughed.

Kara kept the rope tight around Lena's arms until she sat on her lap. Then she let it go and raised it over her head.

"I guess I was wrong," Kara said softly, running her fingers through Lena's hair. "You're much better than calf roping."

"I'm glad you finally think so," Lena whispered, wrapping her arms around Kara's neck. "I would hate to have to wait until spring roundup for another chance with you."

"You won't have to wait," Kara replied, then pulled Lena to her and kissed her.

"Remember this morning you asked me if I loved you?" Lena said softly.

"Yes, I remember."

"Ask me again."

"I don't want to rush you, Lena," Kara replied.

"Ask me," she repeated, looking deep into Kara's eyes.

Kara smiled slowly, savoring the tenderness in Lena's forest-green eyes.

"Do you love me?" she whispered.

"Oh yes. I love you, Kara. I thought I shouldn't allow myself to have these feelings for you. I thought it would be wrong for us to fall in love when you're the patient, and I'm the nurse, but I can't help it. I love you so much. I just think about being in your arms. I need you, Kara, like I've never needed anyone in my life."

Lena responded with her own urgent kisses, devouring Kara's mouth, eagerly savoring her tongue. Amid their frenzied moans and sighs, their hands were fumbling for nipples and breasts while simultaneously pulling each other's shirts aside.

"Yours first," Kara murmured, not wanting to miss a moment of their kiss.

"No, yours," Lena argued, smothering Kara's mouth with hers again and again. "I need yours off. I need to touch you."

"KNOCK KNOCK. Anyone in here?" Lexie called from the back door.

Kara choked, hastily rearranging her shirt as Lena did the same and slid off Kara's lap.

"In here," Lena replied, wiping her mouth and smoothing her hair. She gave a coy smile, trying to appear innocent. Kara pulled her shirt on, trying to cover up.

"You two having fun talking about bull semen?" Lexie said as she entered the room.

"Yes," Kara said, pointing to the rope at Lena's feet. "I was just showing Lena how to lasso."

"Yes, Kara was showing me how to rope," Lena agreed.

"Good," Lexie replied, trying to hide a chuckle. "But next time, when you're teaching Lena something, you might want to close the curtains," she added, pointing to her truck outside the window. Kara and Lena immediately blushed.

"I was just..." Kara stammered, trying to come up with some excuse for what Lexie had likely seen.

"Here. Sign these, Motor Mouth," Lexie said, laughing. "Your dad asked me to bring them. He's over at J'onn's house trying to figure out why the straw count is off by a few hundred."

"Who are these? Registration papers?" Kara asked, taking the envelope from her and pulling out a stack of papers.

"Yeah, he's sending them out tomorrow."

"What's a straw?" Lena asked.

"A bull semen tube," Kara replied, examining the papers. "A-One's straws go for five thousand dollars each."

"Wow. Each?" Lena replied, completely surprised. "I bet my dad never bought any of those."

Kara smiled at her.

"Hey, it sounds like a lot, but if you get a calf from a champion like A-One, it'll grow up and be worth a lot in breeding or semen collection services," Lexie offered. "By the way, that calf you wanted us to look at is growing well. I think he's got the look you want, Kara." Lexie had joined their ranch conversation.

Lena took the opportunity to clear the table and then went upstairs to take a shower. She knew she carried the scent of their horseback ride, leather, and sweat.

"You two have fun talking about bull semen. I'm going to take a shower," she said, starting up the stairs.

"Sorry for interrupting you tonight, Lena," Lexie said.

"It's okay," she replied. "Kara was getting overheated anyway." She winked and hurried up the steps.

"Hey," Kara grumbled in the direction of the stairs, but it was too late. Lena was gone. Kara looked at Lexie and was met with a wide smile. "Oh, shut up."

"I didn't say anything," Lexie declared, trying not to laugh out loud.

"Get me a pen so I can sign this."

Lexie pulled one from her shirt pocket. Kara quickly scribbled her signature and handed the papers back in the envelope.

"Here," she said, pushing it toward Lexie. "Now you can go and take that stupid grin with you." Kara rolled into the kitchen and opened the back door.

"You know, I have to say, I liked the shirt you two were making," Lexie said as she exited through the door. She turned to Kara, unable to control her laughter any longer. "Yeah, I'll have to remember that move." She laughed so hard that tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Very funny," Kara replied and closed the door. When she returned to the dining room, Lexie was standing at the window, still laughing at her. Kara showed her the middle finger and closed the curtains. Lexie backed away, honking just to tease Kara one last time. Kara couldn't help but smile. It wasn't a tragedy that Lexie had seen them kissing and touching. Embarrassing for Lena, perhaps, but they were adults and not hiding anything. At least now Kara didn't have to stumble over her words trying to explain to Lexie what she felt for Lena.

Kara went to the staircase and listened. She could hear the shower running. That meant she had about ten minutes before Lena finished. Kara knew her nighttime routine. She would shower, blow-dry her hair, put on her robe, the one with the rose buttons, and come bounding down the stairs to watch TV. And ten minutes was just the right amount of time for Kara to prepare for her, if she hurried.

Kara buzzed from room to room as she made preparations for Lena's return, and then went to the bathroom for a quick sink bath. She worked like a woman possessed and finished just as Lena opened the bathroom door at the top of the stairs.

"What happened to the lights? Did the power go out down there?" Lena asked, buttoning her robe as she descended the stairs.

"No, but we'll have candles tonight," Kara said, waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs.

"Is Lexie still here?"

"No." She smiled and took Lena's hand. "I thought about trying again, but with the curtains closed."

"Oh, Kara, look at this," Lena gasped, looking at the room filled with candles. "When did you do all this, darling?"

"I got lucky. You take long showers." Kara led her to the bedroom. Lena followed, admiring the cozy love nest she had created. Kara arranged all the pillows and cushions she found in a palette on the floor and then covered it with a blanket. Two glasses of wine filled with apple juice were waiting on the coffee table, and soft music played on the stereo. Candles flickered on every table, bathing the room in a sensual glow.

"What's all this?" Lena asked, picking up a plate of lemon slices. "Are we having iced tea?"

"I didn't have any smelly potpourri, so I made some."

Lena took a deep breath and closed her eyes, sighing at the sweet aroma.

"It's lovely, Kara. What is it? What did you put in the lemons?"

"Vanilla. But I can take it out if you don't like it," Kara replied, ready to do whatever Lena asked.

"It's wonderful. Thank you. You must have put a lot of work into this, didn't you?" Lena came over to Kara and kissed her cheek.

"Could you do a little something for me?"

"What is it, Darling?"

"Help me with this," Kara said, pointing to the hidden elevator in the corner. "I want us down there together. I want you in my arms, and I want to feel your body against mine."

A gleam came to Lena's eyes.

"Yes, I certainly can," Lena whispered and rushed to get it. The time it took to lift Kara out of the wheelchair, position her, and put her on the pallet did not diminish the excitement and anticipation. As soon as she was settled and supported on the floor, Lena was by her side, her robe open, and her body molded against Kara's as they kissed.

"You don't know how much I wish I could climb those stairs to you," Kara said, her hands flowing over Lena's back.

"Do you know how many nights I stared at the ceiling, trying to figure out how to get you up there?" Lena replied, licking Kara's neck and nibbling her ear. She pulled Kara's shirt over her head and tossed it aside. Kara took Lena's robe off her shoulders in a slow strip-tease.

"Tonight we'll be together. Tonight, all my wishes come true."

"And what wishes are those?" Lena slid her hand down to Kara's mound and pulled her hair.

"Tonight, it's just us, two passionate women. Not a nurse and a patient. Tonight, I am whole and strong for you," Kara whispered. "And tonight, you will feel a warm Texas breeze caress your body."

"Melt me, Darling. Melt me." Lena swung a leg over Kara's hips, opening herself to Kara's touch.

"I want to taste you, sweet woman," Kara whispered as she kissed Lena's neck and shoulders. Lena moaned and arched her back as Kara's tongue found her nipple.

"I want that too." Lena could hardly speak. The time for talking was over. Her body was

demanding more. She wanted to feel Kara's hot breath on her soft folds. She wanted to scream in ecstasy as Kara drew every drop of passion from her body. She wanted to lie in Kara's arms as sweat covered their bodies, and their hearts beat in unison.

"Come here," Kara said, guiding her to kneel over her head, facing the molds. Lena assumed her position, offering herself gently to Kara. The first warm touch of Kara's tongue sent a shiver through her, and she uttered guttural sounds.

"Oh, Darling," Lena gasped, her body tingling. She leaned forward on her hands and knees.

Kara wrapped her arms around Lena's hips and pulled her closer, her tongue as skillful as Lena's nimble hands. Lena gently moved the molds just enough and lowered her mouth to Kara's protrusion. Kara gasped, tightening her grip on Lena's hips. She didn't expect Lena to make love to her. Most of the time, she was the one making love to women but going home unsatisfied. She had learned not always to expect reciprocity. With Lena's warm breath warming her dormant volcano, it wouldn't take long for Kara to feel an eruption that would blow the roof off. Kara tried to focus on what she was doing, but it was difficult. She wanted to tend to Lena's need, but her own building spasms clouded her mind. She felt her tongue swell in her throat and could hardly breathe. Kara held Lena tightly as she felt her own orgasm approaching. She increased the pace in the throbbing urge of Lena, forcing her tongue to complete its task before she screamed in ecstasy.

Lena moaned and flexed in response to her own orgasm. Kara wanted to shut her mouth long enough to tell Lena to hurry, but she knew she shouldn't deny someone pleasure at a crucial moment. Instead, she dug her fingers into Lena's hips, holding onto her precious lifeline. The harder she held Lena, the faster Lena's tongue flicked. Sweat dripped from Kara's forehead. Wait, she told herself. Just wait one more minute. Don't climax. Please, wait. But she couldn't contain the powerful shockwave racing to the surface. Kara curled her toes into a tight ball, and her backside clenched as her orgasm exploded within her. As the hot passion roared through her body, she thrust her tongue deeply into Lena, feeling her vagina contract and her protrusion pulse uncontrollably. Lena kept her mouth against Kara until she felt her body relax. Kara moaned, dropping her exhausted arms and struggling to catch her breath. Lena crawled beside Kara and nestled against her side.

"Oh, darling. I've never felt anything so incredible in my entire life," Lena cooed. "I felt like you were a very important part of me."

Kara held Lena close, kissing her temple.

"Please don't laugh, but it was the first time for me," Lena sighed, stroking Kara's neck.

"I'm not laughing at all, love," Kara let out a satisfied sigh.

"I read in a magazine that it's supposedly better than sex on satin sheets."

"Darling, for a moment, you made me forget I had plaster on my legs." She embraced Lena tightly.

Chapter 19

Kara wanted to sleep on the floor with Lena in her arms all night, but her casts didn't cooperate. Lena finally convinced Kara to sleep in her room, although the two couldn't fit in the hospital's single bed. Lena used the lift to transfer her to the bed and gave Kara a goodnight kiss.

"I'll see you in the morning, Darling," Lena whispered and turned off the light. Kara assumed Lena would climb into bed, but she slept on the couch, wrapped in the blanket they had used, with a contented smile on her face. She wanted to be close to Kara.

"I sure wish Kara's big bed was down here," Lena murmured to herself just before falling asleep.

The next morning, Lena peeked into Kara's room as the sun rose over the pasture. Kara's eyes were already open and waiting for her. Kara reached out, and Lena came to her, moving slowly to the side of the bed.

"Hello," Kara said, kissing her. "How did you sleep?"

"I slept far from you, like this, and I didn't like it," Lena stroked Kara's arm, remembering the passion and tenderness of the previous night.

"I didn't like it either. I missed you." Kara pulled Lena closer.

They snuggled together, watching the sunrise through the bedroom window. As soon as the sun's rays hit the bed, Picasso jumped up and made his way between them, seeking the sunlight.

"Hey, Angus. Do you want to come up here too?" Kara teased, stroking his fluffy tail.

"Picasso," Lena corrected, pretending to be critical.

"Angus, she just doesn't get it." Kara formed a tuft of fur on one end of his head.

"What if I called him Coal or Pebbles?" Lena asked, watching Kara play with the cat's ears.

"He'd ignore you. He's stubborn. He won't respond to anything but Coal. I tried to change his name a few years ago. I thought it should be something more masculine since he's a registered Appaloosa stallion. I tried Cherokee and Sergeant and half a dozen others, but he just stood there like an idiot until I called him Coal."

"He looks like a Coal, though. It's just right for him. He doesn't need a fancy name. He's big enough."

"I hate to break up this happy family, but if you'll excuse the expression, nature calls, baby," Kara said, kissing Lena and then pulling the sheet so she could take care of business.

Lena jumped up and helped her with the commode.

"I'm sorry, darling. Why didn't you say anything?" Lena apologized.

"I just did," she winked. "Go get dressed, and I'll take care of this." Kara waved her out.

"I'll make a special breakfast for us, then you can help me with some sketches. I want your opinion. I need to finish them."

Picasso stood by the dining table while they ate and followed them into the art room, hoping for some attention. When it didn't come to his liking, he jumped on the worktable and walked over the sketch Lena was working on.

"Get down, Picasso." Lena frowned, pushing him back with her elbow.

"He won't come down unless you call him Angus."

"His name will turn into mud if he doesn't stop messing with the pictures," Lena advised, trying to maneuver around him.

"Then you and Sydney," Kara said casually as she sat at the table, trying to draw a horse's head.

"Uh-huh," Lena replied, working carefully.

"You've known her for a long time?"

"Uh-huh." Lena raised the sketch, examining it.

"For more than just a few years, right?" Kara suggested.

"Yes." Kara couldn't see the smile growing on Lena's face because of her curiosity.

"You two go to Rainbow Desert often?"

"No. Sydney doesn't like to dance. She prefers going to the movies. In fact," Lena said, looking up, "the only reason we were at Rainbow Desert that night was because I won a bet." She raised her eyebrows as if it were something sinister.

"What kind of bet?"

"We were at her spa, and she bet she could stay underwater longer than I could."

Kara tried not to imagine what they were doing underwater.

"Sydney is a smoker," Lena laughed. "It wasn't even close. I won hands down."

"It sounds like you spend a lot of time together, right?"

Lena put the drawing pencil on the table, pushed her chair back, and turned to Kara.

"Okay. Let's have it. I know you're not just making casual conversation. So, what are you trying to ask?" Lena crossed her hands in her lap, awaiting Kara's explanation.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Kara adjusted the lap towel, avoiding Lena's gaze. "I was just asking about you and Sydney. I thought we might have a good conversation about something other than my cast and your cat's attitude."

"Kara Danvers, you are a big liar," Lena replied. She kissed Kara on the cheek and went back to work.

"I'm not a liar. You're the one being evasive and dishonest. I just asked a simple question, and you didn't answer," Kara declared.

"What question? You've asked a dozen questions about the same thing." Lena finished the sketch and clipped it to one of the clothespins tied to the string. "I'll tell you one thing. You can ask one

more question about Sydney, but just one." Lena raised a finger. "Anything you want to know. Just remember that you only get one question."

"And you'll answer it honestly?"

"If I know the answer, I will. But after that, the Sydney subject is closed."

"Any question, huh?" Kara murmured, her mind searching for the perfect question that would satisfy her curiosity about Sydney and Lena. Her first impulse was to ask if she and Sydney made love regularly or only after trips to the Rainbow Desert, but she knew that sounded tacky. She furrowed her brow as she thought.

Lena looked at her, ready for the question.

"Yes?" she said, studying Kara's expression.

"Don't rush me. I have to think about it," Kara said. She found the boundaries Lena set on her curiosity to be challenging. "One?"

Lena nodded.

"Anything?" Kara added.

Lena smiled and nodded again.

"Yes, Kara. Any question you want to ask."

Kara opened her mouth as if she were ready to ask her question, then closed it and thought a bit more.

"Do you want me to help you?" Lena teased.

"No," Kara cut in. "I can do this on my own, thank you very much."

Lena watched her, trying not to laugh. Kara twisted her face from side to side as she planned her question. She hadn't hidden her feelings for Lena, and she wanted to know how much competition Sydney represented. Kara wanted to know if she could count on Lena and their growing relationship after her recovery. Or if once she was back on her feet, Lena would go back to Sydney and whatever life they had before the accident. Kara couldn't imagine how she could find out everything she wanted to know in just one question. But maybe she didn't need to know the details of Lena and Sydney's relationship. Maybe it didn't matter. That was their personal story, just as Kara's past was her personal story. Kara couldn't change what had happened last month or last year. All she could do was trust her heart from that moment on.

"I have my question ready," Kara finally said.

"I'm listening," Lena replied, leaning back and giving Kara her full attention.

"Where are we spending Valentine's Day, at your place or mine?" Kara asked, looking deep into Lena's eyes.

Lena remained still as she considered the question, her eyes searching Kara's. She smiled slowly.

"Yours," she answered softly. "Your bed is more comfortable than mine." Lena reached out and kissed Kara. "Kara, there's nothing between Sydney and me that makes any difference. Not anymore."

"I'm glad," Kara replied, touching Lena's soft cheek. She sighed in relief and went back to sketching. "This looks more like a goat than a horse," she said, holding it up and tilting it from side to side.

"Here," Lena said, taking it and adding a few lines here and there. She then handed it back.

"Wow, darling. That's amazing. How did you do that? It's a horse." Kara admired it proudly.

"Just four years of college and a scholarship. Sometimes I wonder if I wasted the alumni's money."

"No chance. You have talent. I can't wait to see the sculptures." Kara tossed the pencil on the table, and Picasso chased after it, batting it between his front paws.

"Angus," Lena scolded.

"Ah-ha," Kara rejoiced. "You finally know his name."

The phone rang before she could understand. "I'll get it." Kara wheeled to the door and picked up the phone on the second ring, trying to suppress her laughter. "Hello," she said, watching Lena shoo the cat off her worktable. Her sketches flew in all directions as Angus darted around them.

"Is Mrs. Luthor there?" a woman said in a businesslike voice.

"Just a moment. I'll get her."

"If it's for me, take a message," Lena called from the other room.

"Can I take a message?" Kara asked.

"Who is this?" Lena finally entered the room, carrying a stack of sketches. "Naughty kitty," she scowled in the direction of the cat as he roamed between her legs, trying to be cool.

"This is Mrs. Thelman. I'm the administrator at Glen Haven Nursing Home," the woman told Kara.

"It's Glen Haven, Mrs. Thelman," Kara announced, covering the phone with her hand and checking Lena to see if she wanted to answer.

"I'll take it," Lena said, piling the papers on the dining table. "Just a second."

"Is she coming? The cat was thrown into a pit." Kara joked and handed the phone to Lena.

"Kara Danvers, that's not cool," Lena whispered, tugging on Kara's hair strand. "Hello, Mrs. Thelman."

"Mrs. Luthor, Dr. Jansen asked me to call and let you know that your father had a little episode this morning." The woman's voice was hesitant.

"Yes," Lena replied, not sure what she was trying to tell her. She knew that patients like her father had some days when they seemed more rational than others and others when they regressed dramatically. Small strokes in his brain, a common problem for dementia patients, were often the cause. "I understand he had one last Tuesday as well." She patted Kara's shoulder and pointed at the cat, crouched and ready to leap onto the table. Kara rolled her wheelchair toward him, taking aim at him and his intention to do what he wanted with the sketches once again.

"Dr. Jansen transferred your father to the hospital."

"What exactly did the doctor say was wrong?" Lena asked with growing concern.

"I'm not sure. He asked me to get in touch with you, but that's all I know." The woman chose to play dumb, and Lena didn't like it. She was sure the administrator knew all the details of every patient in the nursing home. It was her job. Lena wasn't buying her uninformed answers.

"Is the doctor at the hospital now?" Lena asked. Kara noticed her expression and moved closer to her.

"I think so. Your father was transferred about an hour ago," Mrs. Thelman replied.

"They took him to the hospital in an ambulance?"

"Yes, we always transfer our patients by ambulance. We have no other way to move them. Don't worry, baby. Med care will take care of it."

"I wasn't worried about that. But could you give me some idea of what happened to my father? Did he fall? Did he faint? What?"

"I'm sorry, but I really don't know. I do know they had oxygen on him in the ambulance. His floor nurse said they had a hard time getting him to leave it on his nose." She chuckled.

"I'm sure they did," Lena said. The idea that he was at least awake and arguing with the ambulance attendants about the sudden chaos of being transferred in an ambulance seemed somewhat reassuring. She was sure Lion was confused and probably belligerent with the sudden chaos of being transferred in an ambulance. "I'll go right away." Lena hung up, her mind swirling with thoughts about what could be wrong.

"What's wrong, baby? What happened to Lion?" Kara asked in a concerned tone.

"They had to take Dad to the hospital. The administrator doesn't know why, or if she does, she won't tell me. She said he was arguing with the nurses about leaving the oxygen on his nose to go to the hospital. I feel so sorry for him. I'm sure he was very confused about the whole thing. It's hard to reason with a patient like him and explain what's happening."

"Call the hospital and talk to the doctor," Kara suggested. Lena stared out the window, seemingly unable to focus on what she needed to do. "Do you want me to call?" she asked softly, taking the phone from Lena's hand.

"What? No, I can do it," Lena replied, snapping back to reality. She called the hospital, a number they had memorized because Kara's doctor was in the medical pavilion attached to the hospital building. "Lion Luthor was transferred by ambulance from Glen Haven Nursing Home about an hour ago. Could you tell me if he's in a room or still in the ER?" Lena asked the operator.

She waited as the woman on the other end looked it up.

"Luthor, Lion?" the operator asked curiously.

"Sorry. His name is Lionel Luthor," Lena corrected. "Lion is his nickname. Dr. Jansen is the attending physician."

"I don't see anyone by the name Luthor. Are you sure about the name? I have a Lionel Desmond and a Lionel Smith."

"No, I'm sure. Luthor," Lena was growing impatient. How could a hospital misplace a patient?

"Maybe he hasn't been entered into the system yet."

"One moment." There was a long pause, and then the operator came back on the line. "Oh, here it is. I'm sorry, but we don't enter transfers of deceased patients into the patient list."

"Dead?" Lena choked out, dropping the phone. Her face went white, and she sank to her knees, unable to get up.

Kara picked up the phone.

"There must be some mistake. Are you telling us Mr. Luthor is dead?" she asked, ready to shout obscenities at the thoughtless and insensitive operator.

"Yes. He passed away about forty minutes ago. The doctor listed the cause of death as a heart attack. We're trying to notify his nearest relatives. Do you know how to contact an LK Luthor?"

"It's not LK Luthor," Kara replied angrily. "It's Lena Luthor, and you just notified her."

The operator stammered out an apology.

"Tell the doctor that Mr. Luthor's daughter will be there within an hour." Kara hung up and turned to Lena as she sat on the floor, processing the news. Kara pulled Lena into her arms as tears flowed. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry, so sorry," she whispered, rocking Lena as she cried. Lena clung to Kara tightly as she cried long and loud. The shock of learning her father had died had shattered their day. Everything stopped. The air refused to move. The only sounds in the house were Lena's sobs and Kara's soft words of support and comfort. Kara called Lexie to come to the house. She didn't explain why. It didn't matter. She knew Lexie would come. Lexie raced through the door and ran through the back door, breathless from her fight to get there.

"What happened?" she asked cautiously, seeing Lena still crying in Kara's arms.

"We need you to take us to the hospital. Lena wants to see her father," Kara advised. "Lion passed away this morning." As she said it, she gently stroked Lena's hair.

Lexie gasped in horror.

"Oh, Lena. I'm so sorry. He was a great farmer. Don't worry. We'll take care of you." Lexie touched Lena's shoulder sympathetically, then put Kara in the van and drove them into town. At first, Lena thought she might go in alone, but the closer they got to the hospital, the more tightly she clung to Kara's hand.

"It's okay, baby," Kara said, gently touching her face. "I'll go with you. They have ramps, and I can get out. I don't mind. You don't have to do this alone."

Lena didn't respond. She closed her eyes and leaned on Kara's shoulder until they stopped at the emergency entrance and waited for help unloading Kara's wheelchair. Together, they went to the information desk. Dr. Jansen came to meet them and offered his condolences.

"I'm so sorry about your father, Mrs. Luthor. He had some chest pains this morning, after breakfast. He was transferred to the hospital but suffered a heart attack in the ambulance. They tried to resuscitate, but..." He stopped and shook his head with sorrow. "There wasn't much they could do."

"I wanted to tell him about horseback riding," Lena said calmly, looking down as tears filled her eyes again. "I wanted him to know."

"He knows, Lena," Kara said, squeezing her hand. "He knows."

"Would you like to see him, Mrs. Luthor?" the doctor asked respectfully, putting an arm around Lena's shoulders. She nodded slightly, then looked to Kara to make sure she would go with her.

"Yes, we would," Kara replied, taking charge of Lena. The doctor wheeled Kara's wheelchair into the emergency room and to a closed door.

"I thought you might want to see your father here," he said, opening the door. Lena slowly raised her eyes and looked inside. Her father lay on a bed, covered up to his neck with a white sheet. He was clean-shaven, clean, and pale. His thin white hair was combed back. He looked like he was sleeping. Lena stopped in the doorway, looking at his lifeless body. She wanted to go in and take his hand. She wanted to say goodbye and tell him she loved him, but she couldn't move. She just stood there and trembled.

"Lena, are you okay?" Kara asked, noticing the color draining from her face. "We don't have to do this."

"I have to," she said weakly. She entered the room and walked up to the bed. She kissed her father's forehead, then turned and ran down the hallway and out. As Kara headed for the parking lot, Lexie did her best to comfort Lena.

"Are you okay, baby?" Kara asked, wishing with all her heart that she could get up and hold Lena in her arms, shielding her from this pain.

"Lion wanted to be cremated and his ashes spread over Little Diamond," Lena said, trying to regain her composure. "Who do I tell?"

"It's already taken care of," Kara reassured her. "The doctor told me Lion left a will and told the nursing home what he wanted. He didn't want you to have to do this."

"I'll have to pay the funeral home," Lena said, her mind now clinging to details.

"Lena, he already paid for it. Years ago. Lion told the director at Glen Haven, and she confirmed with the funeral home. It was the one thing he seemed certain about despite his fading memory. He didn't want to worry you with it. He didn't want to be a burden to you." Lena was puzzled that he paid for his own funeral but forgot to pay his taxes.

Lexie drove Lena and Kara home, Lena's mind spinning with thoughts of her father, her ranch, his funeral, their life together, and the moments they had missed. In the days that followed, Kara stayed close to her, offering a kiss and a comforting touch whenever it seemed Lena was so lost in her grief that she couldn't find her way back. Lena occasionally looked out the window, sometimes reflexively smiling, sometimes concerned with a serious thought.

"I'm going for a walk," Lena announced from the kitchen door. "Will you be okay for a while?"

"Of course, baby," Kara replied, looking up from her newspaper. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Not. I just need some fresh air," Lena offered a weak smile.

Kara wheeled over to the window and watched Lena cross the yard and enter the pasture. She wondered if Lena knew she was heading to her father's ranch. It would take her all day to get there on foot, but the corner of Little Diamond was exactly aligned with the point at the top of the barn. Kara had seen it in an aerial photograph and found it coincidental that their house, barn, and a corner of the Cottonwood Ranch adjoining Little Diamond formed a perfectly straight line. If Lena needed to get away from her thoughts and memories of her father, Kara wondered if she knew she

was heading straight to the ranch she had worked so hard to save.

Lena walked through the pasture for over an hour, resting under a tree for some shade before heading back home.

"I'm back," she said, grabbing a water bottle from the fridge.

"Are you okay?" Kara asked, heading to the kitchen.

"Uh-huh," she replied, taking a long sip. "And yes, I know. It's Texas, so don't fill up on water. I'll get a bellyache." She rubbed Kara's arm as she passed by her on her way to the dining room. She stopped suddenly, looking at the gray plastic box on the table.

"The funeral home brought that over a little while ago," Kara said. There was no sugarcoating the fact that Lena's father was in that box, a plastic bag of ashes that fit in two hands.

Lena's eyes remained fixed on the box. She walked over to the table but didn't touch it.

"Are you sure you don't want a funeral service?" Kara asked gently.

"No. Lion didn't want any service. He was very adamant about that. He just wanted his ashes spread on his ranch. That's it."

"Funeral services are for the living, Lena. It's how you say goodbye and how you begin to heal." Kara put an arm around Lena's waist.

"No. No funeral service. Daddy didn't want one." Lena took one last look at the box and then headed upstairs to wash up.

The next morning, Lena finished her tasks for Kara, administering her injection, helping her into her wheelchair, and taking her vital signs, all around nine o'clock. While Kara sorted through the mail in the living room, Lena picked up the box from the dining room table and headed for the back door.

"Hey, where are you going?" Kara asked.

Lena stopped but didn't turn around.

"I thought I'd take a walk," she replied, clutching the box to her chest. Her voice trembled, and Kara could tell she was on the verge of tears.

"Sweetheart, wait. Don't you want me to go with you?" Kara walked into the kitchen and reached out for her arm.

"You don't want to do this, Kara." Lena didn't look at her.

"Lena, look at me. Of course, I want to do this with you. I'll do whatever you want me to do. Don't you understand? You're not just my nurse. I know it doesn't seem like it with these logs for legs, but I want to help you. I can't even dress myself right now, but one day I will. I want to be the one you run to, Lena. I hate that I can't take care of this for you," Kara said. "I feel so helpless."

"No," Lena argued, looking at her. "You're amazing. You're so brave. I envy how strong you are."

"If you don't want me to go, just say it. I'll understand if this is something you want to do alone."

"No, there's nothing I want more than for you to go with me. I just didn't know how to ask," Lena

replied, a scared look in her tear-filled eyes. "I'm not sure I can do this alone."

"Where are you taking Lion? Do you have a place in mind?"

"I'm not sure. Somewhere in the pasture. Will I be able to drive my van around?"

"I think so. Maybe not everywhere, but most of it is like Cottonwood, relatively smooth terrain. Over time, the cattle make paths between the pasture sections, and you'll be able to drive on dirt roads."

"Can we go now before I change my mind?" Lena asked, wiping away a tear.

"Let's go," Kara replied.

Kara settled into the back of the van and gave Lena directions. She knew all the shortcuts and back roads to get to Lion's property without having to take the county road.

"Turn there, right after the cattle guard," Kara said, straining to see through the windshield.

"The gate's locked," Lena said, slowing down as she approached the gate.

"It's not locked."

"I can see the padlock, Kara. We'll have to turn around." Lena shifted the van into reverse and began to back up.

"No, wait. Drive up to the gate," Kara stated. "Just nudge it."

Lena looked at her skeptically.

"It's not locked, Lena. Trust me."

Lena pulled up to the steel gate and nudged it with the bumper. Nothing happened.

"Do it again, a little harder." Kara squinted at the gate.

Lena gave it another tap, and the gate swung open.

"We were always losing the combination or the key, so we rigged it. This path goes straight to the Little Diamond property when you cross the creek. I think your father knew that and used this gate, too. One of those secrets no one talks about." Kara winked.

"Should I close it?"

"No, we'll close it when we leave."

They crossed a rickety wooden bridge and ascended a hill that overlooked the open pasture. Lena gazed at the wildflower beds filling the pasture with lavender and gold. A pond sparkled in the sunlight, with lily pads lining its edge. An old windmill turned with the breeze, creaking with each revolution.

"There it is," Kara declared. "Little Diamond Ranch."

"I don't remember this view. Isn't it beautiful?" Lena rolled down the window and took a deep breath. "Smell the flowers."

"You wouldn't have any flowers if there were cattle here. Angus loves those tender little blooms." Kara chuckled.

"Then I'm glad Daddy didn't have any."

"Now where to?"

Lena sighed and drummed her fingers on the steering wheel.

"I have no idea. I've been thinking about it for two days. I guess I'll have to drive around and look."

Lena crossed the pasture, navigating around trees, fallen logs, and rocks. It was a challenging journey, causing Kara's wheelchair to sway back and forth. They crossed the fields from one end of the farm to the other for over an hour. Lena occasionally stepped out and surveyed the open spaces, but nothing felt right. Nothing seemed like the place where Lion should rest. Kara did her best to point out various spots. They visited the creek lined with crooked trees and a bare hill with a granite outcrop. They even drove along the property line where Lion repeatedly cut the fence. Lena returned to the center of the pasture, frustrated and angry with herself for her indecision. She drove to the top of the hill and parked beneath a massive poplar tree, seeking shade.

"I'm sorry, darling. I know I'm being silly, but I have no idea which spot to choose. According to the will, I should know where he wants to be. But he never said a word about it. I bet it was just one of those things he thought he had told me but forgot." Lena leaned her head against the seat and closed her eyes. "I don't know what to do."

"Where was his favorite place?"

"I don't know. He never mentioned any place on the ranch that was special to him."

"What's your favorite place, then?" Kara asked, reaching out and rubbing Lena's arm.

"I lived here for such a short time when I was a child. I don't remember much. I remember swinging on a big tree. Daddy cut a piece of barn board and hung it from a branch one summer. I remember that. It was one of the few things I remember us doing together."

"Where was that tree?"

"I have no idea. I was very young. All I remember is that it was on top of a hill, but that's not much to go on."

"Oh, sweetheart. It's just enough to go on," Kara said proudly. "There's only one place on Little Diamond that has a big enough tree for a rope swing and is on a hill." She pointed through the windshield to the tree they were parked beneath. "This has to be your tree."

Lena gasped and sat up. "You mean I was sitting here and didn't even know it? We've passed by this tree half a dozen times in the last hour."

"Do you think this is where Lion would like to be?" Kara asked gently.

Lena got out and stared at the massive tree with its large branches. She could see a piece of frayed rope tied to a branch. A smile slowly spread across her face.

"It's the perfect spot," she said. Lena opened the side door and maneuvered Kara to the opening so she could see. Kara handed Lena the box containing Lion's ashes.

"Will you open it for me? Please," Lena asked as she looked at the box, suddenly unable to face the duty she had come to fulfill. "I don't think I can do this alone."

"All you have to do is ask, darling." Kara opened the lid and removed the plastic bag with the ashes. Lena immediately felt tears welling up in her eyes. Kara opened the bag and lifted it toward Lena, but her hands were trembling too much to hold it. Lena looked at Kara, tears streaming down her face. She shook her head, then threw her arms around Kara's neck, burying her face in her shoulder. Kara kissed Lena's cheek, then turned the bag, emptying the ashes into the wind.

"It's all done, darling," Kara whispered as the bag emptied, and Lion's ashes scattered down the slope. She placed the bag back in the box and handed it to Lena.

Lena walked beneath the tree and stared out at the field, holding the box against her chest. This was Lena's moment to reflect and mourn. Kara didn't intrude. She waited for Lena to return from that distant place where children go when they lose one of their parents, even if it's an adoptive one. He may not have treated Lena with as much kindness and compassion as some parents, but he was her father. Despite all his shortcomings, he was the one who brought her back to Harland, and she would miss him. She stood under the tree, silently watching as the wind spread the ashes in an ever-widening arc. Finally, Lena knelt down and pressed the tip of her finger into a particle of Lion's dust, touching it to her tongue.

"You'll always be with me, Daddy," she whispered and then climbed into the van. She sat there for a long moment, then sighed deeply and turned to Kara. "I have one more thing to do while I'm out here. Would you come with me?" Lena looked at Kara, her expression even more apprehensive than spreading the ashes.

"Of course, Babe. What is it?" Kara agreed immediately.

"You don't have to go inside if you don't want to. I mean, this is something I shouldn't ask you to do. I'll understand if you say no," Lena insisted.

"Sweetie, I'll do anything," Kara replied tenderly.

"I have to go into the house," Lena swallowed hard, as if merely mentioning it was a horror she could barely face. "I have to make sure the utilities are turned off. I can't face it right now, but I'll keep getting bills if I don't turn them off. They have a minimum charge, even if no one is living there."

"All you need to do is call the utility companies and let them know," Kara said, offering a reassuring smile to Lena.

"I know. But I have to do this. Besides, I want to see what's waiting for me. I don't know if I can save the house or not. Daddy left it to me, but it may have gone too far."

"But you have the land. That will always be there."

"I thought it might be a great place for an art studio." Lena laughed at the idea. "Daddy would have a fit if he knew I was thinking of turning his cattle farm into an art retreat. He would never have approved of that."

"You do what Lena Luthor approves of now."

Lena started the van and headed for the house. She stopped at the back door and turned off the engine. They sat there for a long moment, looking at the door and what both knew was waiting inside. Finally, Lena unfastened the boards from the back of the van and pushed Kara onto the

porch. She unlocked the door and pushed it open, the stale, musty smell of a closed-up house wafting out to greet them.

"Whew," Lena scoffed, wrinkling her nose as the smell of decay added to the stench. "I need to open some windows, big time."

"Or remove the roof," Kara muttered, rubbing her nose as the smell brought tears to her eyes.

Kara rolled inside, Lena helping her through the threshold. They both gasped as they surveyed Lion's world. Stacks of newspapers and magazines formed a barrier between the living room and the dining room. Piles of trash, garbage bags, and heaps of dirty clothes covered the floor. Every chair and table was cluttered with trash. Coffee cans with cigarette butts and tobacco juice covered the tables. Unopened mail was scattered everywhere, used as coasters for cans and soup with opened lids. A stool was filled with aluminum foil, half-eaten and covered in bugs and rat droppings. Countertops in the kitchen were covered with dirty dishes and pots. Several cardboard boxes were filled with empty beer cans. Muddy footprints created a path from the door to the kitchen and back, leading to the bathroom and the bedrooms at the end of the hallway. The path between the piles of debris was narrow and treacherous. The ceiling was stained with water leaks, and the wallpaper was peeling, with strips hanging like curtains.

Lena didn't say anything. There was nothing she could say, no words for the terrifying horror of the way her father had lived. She opened the door to his room and groaned. The bed sheets were once white, she assumed, but were now stained a dirty brown. Clothes were strewn all over the furniture, doorknobs, and doors, all of them filthy rags covered in mud.

"I guess there's nothing here worth keeping," Lena said, carefully opening a box of canceled checks and papers, most of them yellowed with age.

"I bet you found Lion's filing system," she called out while holding up a check from the box. "He bought fourteen bales of hay from his father in Eighty-One and paid twenty-four dollars and fifty cents."

"Wow. That's a bargain. That's the year Dad switched to round bales."

"There's a scribbled note on the bottom of the check. It says Jeremiah won't deliver them." Lena laughed.

"We never delivered hay." Kara laughed too. "But I bet Lion tried to talk him into it."

"I'm sure he did." Lena returned the check to the box and wiped her hands. Suddenly, she began to laugh as she opened another box.

"What did you find?"

"Do you know those tags that are stapled to the back pocket of new jeans? Well, he saved them. This is a whole box of clothing labels. There are flannel shirt tags, a denim jacket tag, underwear wrappers, and even pairs of sock hangers."

"Maybe he kept them in case he needed to return them," Kara suggested.

"Thank you, darling, but I doubt there's any logical reason for him to keep them."

"Just trying to help." Kara moved closer to the beginning of the hallway. "Are you sure you want to go through more of this today? We can get a dumpster in the yard. When I'm up and about, we can clean it room by room."

"I just want to look in the bedrooms. Who knows? Dad might have a cow hidden in here. It'll only take a minute."

"Okay, I'll be here if you need me."

Lena opened the door that used to be her mother's sewing room. She remembered it had floral wallpaper and white curtains with grommets on both windows, curtains her mother had carefully stitched with tiny stitches. She also remembered there was a twin bed with a white-painted iron headboard. It was where guests stayed. The only guest Lena recalled was Grandma Luthor, who came to spend Christmas one year before Lena and her mother moved. The only things Lena remembered about Grandma were her teeth, which she kept more in a glass than in her mouth, and the white handkerchief she tucked into her floral dress belt. Lena didn't recall playing with Grandma or receiving words of encouragement from her. Grandma Luthor was a quiet, reserved woman. She passed away a few years later, something Lion didn't tell Lena for several years. The sewing room door was stuck, the wood swollen at the top. Lena leaned into it, giving it a hip bump. It opened a few inches and then hit something inside. She stuck her head in the door to see what was blocking it.

"What's in there? More junk?" Kara asked.

"Looks like it. A pile of boxes tumbled over and is blocking the door. All I can see is a lot of old clothes and some broken furniture." Lena coughed and choked. She pulled her head back out and closed the door. "It stinks. Smells musty." She coughed and sneezed. "I need to open the windows in there, but not today."

"No rush," Kara offered. "You have plenty of time."

"I'll get to it. Let me check the other room."

"Which one was yours?"

"This one," Lena replied, pointing to the closed door. She turned the doorknob and waited for it to be stuck, but it released effortlessly. She held the doorknob in her hand for a moment, the door barely ajar. A sudden rush of memories washed over her. She wasn't ready to see her room. She wasn't ready to see the room she remembered with cotton curtains and a canopy bed turned into a room filled with junk. She wanted her childhood memories protected from what she knew was behind that door. She took a deep breath, straightened up, and slowly pushed the door open. She had prepared herself for what she would find. Lena stood frozen in the doorway. She couldn't speak or move with what she saw. Her hand remained on the doorknob, the knuckles of her fingers white from her grip.

"Is it full, or just halfway?" Kara joked, trying to lighten the horror of what Lena surely found.

Lena didn't respond.

"Lena?" Kara cautiously called, not wanting to intrude on her memories. "Hey sweetie. Are you okay?" she asked, growing concerned about the terrible things Lena might have found.

Lena stepped into the room and stared, her mind swimming with childhood memories.

"Lena?" Kara called out gently. "What is it?" She made her way down the hallway, pushing the trash and boxes out of her way. She could hear the bedroom door close.

"Lena," Kara shouted as she worked her way through the obstacle course of trash.

When she reached the door, she was out of breath and sweating from the effort. She carefully turned the doorknob and pushed it open. Lena was sitting next to a canopy bed covered with a white quilt with pink flowers. There were faded pink curtains on the windows. A fairy tale-themed lamp was on the dresser along with a ballerina figurine. A child's red felt cowboy hat hung on the back of a small rocking chair. A wooden rocking horse was in the corner, a small pink quilt on its back like a saddle. Nothing was out of place. Nothing was scattered on the floor. Except for the layers of dust, it was as if a child still lived in the room. Lena looked at Kara, her face even paler than usual, her eyes wide, stunned by what she had found.

Kara rolled in, turning slowly and studying the row of framed photos on the wall. The one above the dresser was of a baby with dark curls and dimples on her cheeks. The baby was happy and laughing at the man who held her proudly above his head. The next photo was of a barefoot child in lacy underwear picking a flower from a vase of flowers. The photos chronicled the dark-haired little girl as she grew into adolescence, becoming a young woman and adult. There was a photo of Lena when she graduated from high school and another in her nurse's uniform. Another of her next to one of her metal sculptures was in a frame with a newspaper clipping tucked into the glass corner. Other newspaper clippings were pasted on the mirror in an organized row, some about Lena's artistic achievements, others about her scholarships. A snapshot of Lena receiving a check was handwritten at the bottom with the words, Henson Scholarship for Outstanding Art Achievement. Another clipping announced Lena's commission to create the sculptures for the rodeo grounds. All the photos and clippings that Lena had sent to her father were preserved and proudly displayed.

"I had no idea," Lena whispered as her eyes roamed around the room. "He never said anything about this."

"How could he tell you? One thing is for sure, baby. Your father loved you more than any father has ever loved a child. He was proud of you from the moment they brought you home. He just didn't know how to tell you." Kara touched the photograph of Lena and her mother glued to the wall. "Your father had the right to brag about you, Lena. That's for sure." Kara smiled warmly at her. Lena rushed to Kara and hugged her, a sense of relief and contentment washing over her. She had the one thing she thought she'd never have, a father who truly loved her.

Chapter 20

The few days leading up to Kara's medical appointment felt like an eternity. Lena knew she was eager to have her casts removed, and nothing seemed more important to both of them than that day. Kara offered support for Lena's pain, trying her best to hide her own anxiety to lift Lena's spirits. Kara received flowers from town every day. Lena's favorites – bouquets of roses, daisies, and bluebonnets. Kara tried to ask for as little help as possible. She thought about hiring someone to take care of her, but Lena wouldn't hear of it. She insisted she could do her job, a job she did with love and care.

"Lena," Kara called from her room. "I could use your help for a minute. Are you busy?"

"Yes, I am," she said, entering the room and drying her hands on a towel. "I'm getting ready to go into town. I have to leave in ten minutes," she added. "What's up?"

"And where do you think you're going? What if I need you for something?"

"Sorry, but this is important. I'm taking a lovely farmer I know to see her doctor so she can get her casts removed. She's been waiting a long time for this and doesn't want to be late." Lena winked at her.

"Oh, really. And do you think you should be present when she takes her first steps?"

"I absolutely want to be there," Lena replied, smiling sweetly. "She promised me a big hug and a kiss."

"That sounds like a promise she should keep. I can't think of a more deserving recipient of a hug and a kiss than you. I can't tell you how much I appreciate everything you've done for me. You've helped me through this, and I can't wait until I'm up and about to show you just how much." Kara reached out for Lena. When she took it, Kara pulled Lena into her lap and kissed her. "So, we have ten minutes." Kara asked, smiling suggestively at her.

"Nine minutes, and no, that's not enough for what you have in mind," Lena teased, and got up. "Now, what do you need my help with?"

"Pants," Kara replied, holding up a pair of well-worn gray sweatpants that she had cut into shorts. "I want something to cover my butt. These are too big on me, and I thought we could pull them over the casts. I'm taking jeans and my boots to wear at home, but could you help me put these on now?" Kara tried to hook one of her legs, but couldn't.

"First things first," said Lena, taking the shorts and finding the front. "Have you used the little girl's room recently?"

"Yes, I have, but thanks for asking." Kara laughed.

"Alright then. Let me see what I can do." Lena stood at the foot of Kara's bed and slid the shorts over the casts. They fit well until they reached her knees, and then the elastic was stretched to its limit. Kara lifted as much as she could while Lena wiggled and pulled them up over her thighs. "It's going to be a tight fit," Lena said, working them up inch by inch. "If the doctor wants to remove them before taking off the casts, they'll have to cut them."

"I don't mind, but I don't want to go in there with nothing on."

"Done, all finished."

"I'm even wearing a real shirt and a bra," Kara said proudly, smoothing the front of her western shirt with pearl buttons. "First time in weeks."

"I like this shirt," Lena said with a smile, adjusting the collar. "This is the one you wore that night at Rainbow Desert when you were blocking the entrance."

"It's the one I was wearing when I saw the woman of my dreams," Kara offered tenderly.

"It will be our shirt. I'll always remember it as the shirt you were wearing when you told me to f-off." Lena kissed Kara on the nose.

"You're not going to let me forget that, are you?"

Lena shook her head.

"So, Tex, are you ready to go?" Lena picked up the bag containing Kara's underwear, favorite jeans, socks, and polished boots.

"I was ready two months ago. Let's go." Kara went straight to the back door, bumping into all the furniture along the way.

"Go sit on the back porch and wait." Lena kissed the top of her head as she passed. "I'll bring the van up."

"Wait, I have to go to the bathroom again," Kara muttered with disgust, heading for the bathroom. She stopped and turned around. "No, I don't. Just nerves."

"Darling, I hate to throw a wet blanket on you, but have you thought that the doctor might not remove the casts today? The X-rays might show that your legs need a little more time to heal," Lena cautiously pointed out.

"Don't say that," Kara replied, covering her ears with her hands. "I don't even want to think about that. The doctor is taking off the casts today. I'm healed. I'm fine. I get my life back today. Now hurry up. Get that cute little butt of yours in gear and back the van up."

"Okay, be right back," Lena replied and rushed out the back door.

Kara nervously waited on the back porch as Lena positioned herself against the steps. Lena maneuvered the wheelchair into the van, locked it in place, and stepped away.

"By the way, I'm riding shotgun on the way home," Kara announced from the back. "I don't care if my legs have to hang out the window; I'm sitting up front. I'm tired of being cargo."

"Sure, darling," Lena mused.

"And I can stop on the way and woo my girl."

"Yes, darling," Lena repeated with a more upbeat tone, looking at Kara through the rearview mirror and smiling broadly.

Kara was practically jumping for joy when she entered the doctor's waiting room. The doctor's office was attached to the hospital, and when Kara was told he was running late due to an emergency, Lena thought she might need to contain her. Finally, Kara was called into the examination room. As the doctor examined X-rays and blood tests, Kara lay on the examination

table, rolling her eyes and tapping her fingers on the sides of the casts.

"It won't take long, darling," Lena whispered, sitting in the chair beside the examination table. She reached out and gave her arm a reassuring pat, trying to calm Kara's nerves.

"Looks good, Kara. Looks really good," said the doctor, sliding the X-rays onto the light panel and turning it on. "You're a lucky lady. All knitted up. No infection. No loose pins. The plate looks good and tight." He took a long look at the X-rays through his bifocals and then turned to Kara with a smile. "So, do you want to take these casts off, or do you want to keep them on a little longer?"

"Get rid of these things, doctor. I've been waiting all day for this." Kara sat up and grimaced at him.

"I figured as much, but I hate to destroy the artwork on your casts. Who did this?" he asked, looking at the drawings and sketches covering the white casts.

"Lena did this. She's a great nurse, but an even better artist. You should see the metal sculptures she makes." Lena blushed as Kara sang her praises.

The nurse handed the doctor the cast cutter. He started from the outside, slowly advancing down her left leg and then coming up the other side.

"Kara, I want you to remember that the muscles in your legs haven't been used for a long time. They will have lost a lot of their strength. It will take a while for you to get back to normal. Take it easy at first. Stay away from your horse for a while. Do you hear me?" He gave her a stern look. "And no calf roping or bull riding or whatever else you do. The leg muscles need to regain their strength. I've ordered physical therapy three times a week for two weeks. Then we'll reevaluate." "I heard you," Kara said, watching the cutter slowly advance through the cast.

"No driving today. You let Lena take you home. Take it easy for the rest of the day."

"It seems like you don't trust me, Doc," Kara said.

He looked over his glasses at Lena and then at Kara.

"Wasn't it you who broke your arm two years ago and then broke it again a day after the cast was removed?" he asked, starting to pick up the other cast.

"No. I think that was Lexie," Kara knew very well he was talking about her. She was also the one who rode Coal during the rodeo with a strap around two broken ribs.

"Nevertheless, I'm giving some instructions to Lena."

Kara anxiously watched as he made the final cuts. He finally set the cutter aside. There was a stale smell of sweat and plaster as he removed the top of one of the casts, but it was still like a plunge into a cold stream for Kara.

"Oh, wow. This feels so good," she said, throwing her head back and sighing deeply. She didn't need to move to feel better. Just having the cast off was heaven. The doctor lifted the other cast and examined the scar on her shin where he had performed the surgery. He raised each leg and moved the lower half of the cast away. Kara could barely stand the wait as he examined her legs.

"Can you move your toes?" he asked.

Kara flexed her feet up and down, wiggling her toes. She bent her knees and rolled each leg from side to side, a proud smile on her face. Lena watched closely, also smiling at the progress.

"Okay, let's see you stand on them." He helped her down from the table. "No heroics, Kara. Just stand on them. Lean on the table if you need to."

Kara eagerly got up, but was surprised at how weak she felt. Her leg muscles contracted as she put her weight on them. She quickly leaned on the table, but was determined to stand. Lena instinctively reached out, ready to catch her.

"It feels a bit weird, doesn't it?" he said, stepping back.

"No kidding," Kara said, bracing herself on the table.

"I want you to use this for a few days," he advised, handing her an aluminum cane. "You might think you don't need it, but as your muscles rehabilitate, they'll tire faster. Use the cane for support."

Kara gave it a try. She took a hesitant step, feeling and looking like a newborn calf finding its legs for the first time. She tried another hesitant step, obediently using the cane.

"Good," he said, watching her carefully. "I want to see you in two weeks, and I don't want you overdoing it, Kara Danvers."

"Thanks, Doc," she said, a huge smile on her face. She radiated her independence as she took a few more hesitant steps around the room. She straightened up and turned to walk towards Lena, her face glowing with confidence. Suddenly, her face lost color, and she reached out for the table. A deep frown creased her forehead as she pulled the cane closer, leaning heavily on it.

"Kara?" Lena said, noticing her strange expression.

"It's really hot in here," she muttered, sweat immediately forming on her forehead.

"Mrs. Danvers?" the doctor asked, looking up as he finished some notes in her chart. He studied her frozen gait. "Are your legs stiff? Do you need to sit down?"

"I don't know," she replied as the room started to spin. She felt a searing pain grip her lower back and send a shock down her legs that left her breathless. Kara opened her mouth to scream at the surprising and excruciating pain, but nothing came out. Her eyes widened as she clutched her back just below her waist.

"Kara?" Lena cried out, realizing her strange expression.

"Sure is hot in here," she mumbled, breaking into a sweat.

"Mrs. Danvers?" the doctor asked repeatedly, checking her vital signs. "Kara," Lena repeated, her voice anxious and cautious. She was just a nurse's aide, but she had read something on the doctor's face that told her he was concerned.

Kara finally opened her eyes and tried to focus on Lena, but she looked confused.

"Is it too hot for you in here?" she murmured.

"Kara, what happened?" Lena asked, dropping the bag and taking Kara's hand.

"The blood pressure is low," the nurse reported, checking it again.

"Do you faint when you stand up too quickly?" Lena wondered.

"I don't know. I'm just passing along a message," she added.

"Alright," Lena said, rushing down the hall. Lena could barely contain herself as she flew around the corner and past the nursing station. She pushed open the door to room 118 and saw Kara sitting on the bed in a hospital gown, a sheet covering her legs. "Are you finally ready to get out of here?" Lena asked, forcing a smile and a cheerful tone.

She came to the bedside and was immediately greeted by Kara's vacant expression. She slowly raised her eyes to meet Lena's, traces of tears clearly visible on her face.

"Kara, what happened?" Lena asked, dropping the bag and taking her hand.

"The MRI showed the cause of Mrs. Danvers' collapse," the doctor said calmly, standing on the other side of the bed. "Kara had a spinal stroke."

"WHAT?" As a nurse's aide, Lena instantly understood what that meant, but she loved Kara too much to accept it.

"The tests revealed a blood clot," he added, closing the chart and tucking it under his arm.

Kara closed her eyes as the doctor delivered the bitter news.

"No, no. She can't have a blood clot," Lena choked out. "I gave her the shots. I never missed one. She's been on low molecular weight heparin twice a day, every day, since she came home. I've been so careful with it." Lena argued her case as if she could undo the news by defending her nursing skills. "And I've been so careful with turning her and elevating her legs. We followed your orders to the letter, doctor." Lena frowned at him. "I even made sure she had a balanced diet, like you told me."

"It had nothing to do with you. The blood clot might have been caused by the initial accident that broke her legs and was just waiting to move. It might have been something she had for years. It's hard to say. But I'm sure it had nothing to do with the care or the time she spent at home," the doctor said, addressing Lena with a sympathetic tone. "When she got up and took her first steps, the clot migrated. Then boom." He snapped his fingers. The sound made Kara flinch.

"What are you going to do about it? Remove it surgically? Dissolve it?" Lena asked, holding Kara's hand so tightly that her knuckles were white.

"As I told Kara, it was very small and took just a second to happen, but when the blood clot restricted blood supply to the nerve, the nerve suffered irreparable damage."

Kara kept her eyes closed, but Lena could see the muscles in her jaw tighten.

"Irreparable?" Lena asked cautiously. She knew what it meant, but she wanted the doctor to say it. She didn't want to be the one to assume the worst.

"When a nerve is denied its blood supply, it dies," the doctor said as sensitively as possible. "It appears Kara's sensory impulses are intact." That statement had all the characteristics of dropping just one shoe.

"But--"

"But Kara's motor neurons in her legs were damaged," he added.

Lena closed her eyes, unable to accept the statement. She wished she didn't understand the medical jargon. But it wouldn't change the fact. Lena knew exactly what he meant. He had just explained that Kara would never walk again. She might feel pain in her legs, but she couldn't get up and cross the room. Kara was used to chasing calves, saddling a horse, and working in the barn. She loved the outdoors, sports, fresh air, the gears of her pickup truck, dancing until midnight at the Rainbow Desert. But all of that was behind her now. Lena looked at Kara, her eyes still closed as she sat motionless on the bed.

"Tell him, Kara. Tell him we did everything exactly as he told us. You didn't do anything you weren't supposed to. Tell him, Kara." Lena's voice faltered as she watched Kara, praying that she would suddenly throw the sheet aside, get up, and walk out of the room. A tear rolled down Kara's cheek, slowly making its way down.

"Let's keep Kara for a few days and monitor the situation," the doctor said.

"Okay," Lena replied, her chin trembling.

"Kara, let me or the nurse know if you need anything," he said, squeezing Kara's hand. "I'll be back later tonight to check on you."

Kara didn't respond. She just nodded slightly. She couldn't even look him in the eyes.

"We'll take good care of her, Lena," he said, then left them in a cold silence.

Lena carefully sat on the edge of the bed. She brushed Kara's hair away from her face and rubbed her thumbs along the tear tracks.

"Darling," she said softly. "I'm here for you. What do you want me to do?"

Kara finally opened her eyes and lifted them to meet Lena's. There was a painful vulnerability in them that frightened Lena. The Kara she knew was gone. This was a different person.

"Take me home," Kara whispered, her voice weak and lifeless.

Lena felt tears welling up in her eyes, and she couldn't contain them. She grabbed Kara and held her in her arms as her sobs overtook her.

"Oh, God, I wish I could," she replied through tears. "You don't know how much I wish I could."

Kara's tears mixed with Lena's, the sounds of their crying filling the room. Kara crossed her arms around Lena, pulling at her shirt as her body shook with despair.

"My sweet baby," Lena cried, rocking Kara in her arms.

Chapter 21



At the moment Kara was discharged from the hospital and returned home, she had a nearly constant stream of sympathizers and supportive friends stopping by to hug her and look at her lifeless legs. Lena stayed in the background, helping where she could but allowing Eliza and Jeremiah to take care of her. Kara had changed. Whether she was in shock or hadn't yet accepted the tragic realization that she would never walk out the door on her way to a busy day at the ranch, she was no longer the energetic, robust woman Lena remembered from the first time she walked into her garage and looked at her. Lena wanted that Kara back. Not because she could walk, but because she cared about things. She cared about life and herself. This Kara was somber and apathetic. Her eyes had lost their sparkle, and she hadn't smiled since the day she fell to the examination room floor.

Lena didn't expect her to downplay her situation, but she hoped Kara would fight for what she could do instead of wallowing in what she couldn't. But it was hard to find any brightness in a house where the conversation revolved around Kara's disabilities. It wasn't Lena's place to tell Eliza that Kara had already heard enough pity. She needed to hear something positive. Lena understood that this was difficult for Eliza and Jeremiah. They were suffering just like Kara. They had also lost something. They had lost the part of their daughter who smiled and laughed and ran to conquer the world. What was left for them to protect was a broken woman. It took five days for the house to calm down and return to normal. Jeremiah and Eliza had planned a trip to Cheyenne for a cattleman's conference but threatened to cancel it, saying Kara needed them more. Kara insisted that they keep their reservations. In no uncertain terms, she demanded to be left alone and for them to continue the trip. Her words were concise, something they assumed was just her way of persuading them to go. But Lena knew better. She could see that Kara was reaching critical mass and about to implode. Her parents reluctantly agreed and set off on the trip.

"Your lunch is here on the table," Lena said, entering the room. "Don't you want it? I made chicken salad sandwiches, just the way you like them."

"I'm not hungry," Kara said, looking absentmindedly at the television.

"Can I put it in the fridge, and you can eat it later?"

"I'm not hungry," she repeated.

"Okay. I'll take a sandwich to Lexie. I saw her go into the barn," Lena said, seeing if mentioning her name would draw Kara's attention outside. But she just nodded. "I'll be back soon." Lena let her hand gently caress Kara's arm.

Lena wrapped a sandwich in a napkin and headed out.

"Lexie," Lena called in the barn. "Are you here?"

"Here, Lena," she replied, coiling a rope into a perfect figure-eight.

"I brought you a snack. Chicken salad sandwich. Oh, look," she exclaimed cheerfully. "Do we have a new baby?" She peered over the top rail of a stall.

"Yes, a baby heifer."

"Lexie, look at her," Lena cooed to the little black calf, wobbling on shaky legs. "Isn't she cute? Oh, I forgot." Lena chuckled. "Calves aren't cute. They're money in the bank." She smiled at Lexie.

"You catch on fast," Lexie returned a half-smile.

Lena crouched by the fence and reached a finger to touch the new baby.

"How's Kara?" Lexie cautiously asked, a painful tone in her question.

"Why don't you go inside and see her?"

"I have a lot of work here today," Lexie declared, trying to appear busy with the feed bucket. "Maybe next time."

"Lexie, you need to deal with this just like Kara does."

"I have no idea what you mean. But a ranch doesn't run itself. I have more work than ever now that..." Her voice faltered.

"You mean now that Kara is permanently in a wheelchair?"

"I didn't mean that." Lexie turned away, hiding whatever her face might reveal.

"Yes, you did. You're angry at Kara for giving you all this extra work, aren't you?" Lena knew it wasn't true, but she wanted Lexie to say it.

"Hell no, I'm not," she shouted. "I'm not mad at her. I'd never be mad at her." Lexie emptied the feed into a trough and threw the bucket against the wall. "It's not her fault she can't walk." It was the first time Lena had heard Lexie really angry, and she was glad it wasn't directed at her.

"You know she wishes she could come out here and help. She can't even bring herself to watch from the porch. Couldn't you come visit her for a minute?" Lena studied Lexie with sympathy. She knew this was hard for her. Lexie would do anything for Kara. Watching her go from an active and vibrant woman to an invalid must be incredibly painful for her.

Lexie cut the twine on a bale of hay and started breaking off flakes.

"Lexie, she needs you. You're the only one who hasn't seen her. You're her friend, and she needs to know you still accept her for who she is. She's still Kara, the same funny, smart, and attractive woman she's always been."

Lexie kept her focus on her work, but Lena could see she was battling her emotions.

"I still love her," Lena confessed. "I always will. She doesn't believe me, but I do." Lena walked up to Lexie and took her arm. "Do you love her enough to help her through this?"

Lexie looked at Lena, her eyes narrowed and sharp.

"You have no idea," Lexie replied. "I'd cut off my own legs if it would give Kara the use of hers back."

"Will you help her?"

"You tell me what to do to help Kara, and I'll do it."

"I want you to saddle Coal and tie him up on the back porch." Lexie stiffened and stepped back.

"No, I won't do that," she replied bitterly. "I won't hurt her like that."

"Please, just do it. I'll take responsibility for it."

"She can't ride her horse. She can't even get into the saddle."

"I need you to trust me on this, Lexie." Lena grabbed one of Lexie's hands and squeezed it. "Please. Just do it."

Lexie scowled at her, but Lena could see she was still deciding what to do.

"Coal is her horse. She needs to touch him," Lena explained. "She needs to know she's still Kara Danvers, not a freak. I can't wait for her to get so deep inside herself that she can't reach her. She has a lot of obstacles ahead, and there will be the rest of her life. She has to know she can conquer at least one of them. Lexie, she needs to do this. She may not think so, but she does. Trust me."

"How can you be so sure?" Lexie asked in doubt.

"If you think I'd deliberately hurt her, no, of course not. But I'm not going to stand by and watch her waste what's left of her life. I'm pretty sure of that. My first instinct is to keep her safe and free from any danger again. I want to protect her just like you do. But that won't help her. I don't think we have a choice, not if we love her. I don't want her spending the rest of her life in that room, content to let life pass her by. She has too much to give."

"She can't ride her horse. She can't even get into the saddle."

"You saddle Coal. I'll take care of the rest. Believe me, Lexie. If I knew how to saddle him myself, I would." Lena looked confident, something Lexie needed to hear.

"All right," she finally agreed. "I hope she doesn't hate me for this," Lexie said, heading for the tack room.

Lena went back home. Kara was in the dining room, going through a stack of mail and tossing closed catalogs into a trash bag.

"Would you like something to drink, darling?" Lena asked, standing behind her and wrapping her arms around her shoulders.

Kara shook her head, forcing her attention back to her task.

"Iced tea?" Lena teased. "I promise, no apple juice." She caressed Kara's cheek but felt her pull away from her touch.

"I don't need anything."

"They're bringing the hospital bed this afternoon. Some of the ranch hands will come later to bring your bed down from upstairs." Lena wanted to tell Kara about the available equipment for her, but thought better of it. Kara didn't need to hear about the paraplegic shower bench or the catalog of pants and easier-to-operate accessories just yet. There would be time for that later. Lena wanted to tell Kara how much she looked forward to their first night together in the same bed. Sleeping next to Kara was something Lena had been waiting for weeks. The idea of lying next to Kara still sent tingles through Lena's body that were undeniable. But she knew there would be time for that too. For now, getting Kara out of her self-imposed prison was more important than anything else. When she came home with casts on her legs, she was angry and stubborn. But now Kara was indifferent to everything and everyone. "You'll sleep in your own bed tonight. I bet you can't wait. A nice big queen-size bed instead of that small one. I have some new sheets for it. Have you ever slept on satin sheets, Tex?" Lena hugged her around the neck and kissed her cheek.

"No, I like cotton." Kara showed little interest in the idea or Lena's deliberate insinuation.

"Cotton is good, but satin is sexy," Lena whispered in her ear. "Just wait."

"Lena, please, I have things to do," Kara said, moving away. "We'll talk about it later."

"Don't you remember how you felt that first night we were together?" Lena asked, kneeling by Kara's wheelchair. "That night you said you couldn't wait to touch me and hold me. Your body against mine was the most sensual feeling I've ever had. Your hands on my skin were so soft that I wanted to stay in your arms all night. Can't you remember that night? And what if we can still have those special moments? Don't you want to know?"

"You mean, what if I can't walk, but at least we can still fuck?" Kara responded bitterly. "That would be great for you now, wouldn't it?" She looked at Lena cruelly.

"I didn't mean that," Lena stammered. "You know I would never think that, Kara." Kara's words cut Lena as deeply as Lion's words had. Lena knew Kara was hurting, and like Lion, she had to ignore her outburst, though it was still hard to hear. "I love you, Kara. I want to help you."

Kara straightened up in her wheelchair and sat up as tall as she could.

"I won't need a CNA this time. I don't need shots to prevent a blood clot," Kara said coldly. "You're free to go back to your art studio."

"Kara, do you blame me for this?" Lena asked, putting her hand on Kara's leg.

"No," she retorted. "I'm the only one to blame. I'm the one who changed the flat tire on the trailer."

"You didn't do this to yourself. It just happened. No one is to blame. It was a terrible accident, but only God knows why."

Kara didn't reply but looked out the window. When she did, she gasped. Coal was tethered to the

back porch railing just a few yards away. Just as Lena had asked Lexie to do, he was saddled and proudly waiting for a rider. Kara couldn't take her eyes off him. She dropped the stack of catalogs and rolled to the window. She put her hand on the glass as if she were touching Coal's long, smooth nose. The sight of her horse captivated Kara so much that she took a deep breath and couldn't let go.

"What's he doing out there?" she asked. "Why is Coal tied to the railing? Where's Lexie?"

Lena went to the window and looked outside.

"I don't know. When I took the sandwich to her, she was feeding the heifers. By the way, you have the cutest little heifer, Kara. It's a girl. She has the biggest brown eyes." Lena wanted Kara to argue with her and say it wasn't a cute calf; it was just part of the ranch's commercial yield. But Kara just nodded.

"Coal needs to be in the corral."

"Please, don't ask me to move him, Kara. You know he's too big for me to handle." Lena put her hand on Kara's shoulder. "It was all I could do to guide Tum around."

"Lexie needs to move him," Kara said, pulling her wheelchair away from the window. She couldn't help but take another look over her shoulder.

"Do you want to go out on the balcony and talk to him? I'm sure he misses you."

"Coal needs to learn not to expect me to go for a ride. The sooner he accepts that, the better for him."

"I'm not sure where Lexie is. Are you sure you don't want to touch him just once? After all, he's right there." Lena looked at Kara, hoping to persuade her to at least go out on the balcony.

"No," Kara replied, her gaze once again finding its way out the window and to Coal's proud stance.

"Okay, I'll go get her." Lena headed for the door, then looked back at her. "Coal loves you too, Kara," she said softly, then went out to the barn to find Lexie.

"What did she say?" Lexie asked from the other side of the barn.

"She said for you to get him out of the sun," Lena replied, stopping next to her. From the dark corner of the barn, they could see the back porch where Coal was waiting.

"I'm not surprised that was her reaction. I'll move him," Lexie said with a mournful sigh.

Lena grabbed her arm and stopped her.

"No. Leave him there." Lena kept an eye on the house.

"But you said Kara wants me to move him," she said skeptically.

"That's what she said, but it's not what she wants."

"I'm sorry, but I can't be a part of this." Lexie furrowed her brow and looked at the horse. "If she doesn't want him there, I'll move him."

"No, wait," Lena gasped, realizing the back door was open, and Kara was sitting on the porch. "Look," she whispered.

"She's going to call for me to get him. You watch," Lexie said calmly.

"If she does, don't respond. Just give her a few minutes." Lena held Lexie's arm firmly.

Kara opened the screen door and rolled out. She kept her distance from Coal, scanning the yard and pasture for signs of Lexie or Lena.

"Lena, I can't do this with her," Lexie said, her voice quivering slightly.

"Wait," she insisted as Kara looked at her horse. Coal neighed deeply and shook his head, pulling the reins to reach Kara. He tugged on the rope, and the reins came loose from the railing. Coal approached Kara and nuzzled her. She tried to ignore him, but he persisted, nibbling her shirt and licking her hand.

"Coal, no, go back," Kara said, tugging at his harness. He shook his head, dropping the reins in her lap. Kara grabbed them and looked around for someone to help her. "Lexie? Lena?"

"Shh," Lena whispered, holding Lexie back. "Let her hold him."

"Lexie!" Kara yelled angrily. "Where are you?"

Lexie's chin trembled as she watched Kara with her horse. She was a tough, sensible woman, but the sight of Kara holding the reins of her beloved horse in a wheelchair was more than she could bear. Tears streamed down Lexie's face. She looked to Lena for guidance. She wanted to go to Kara. If holding Coal's reins was too painful for her, she wanted to rescue her.

"She's okay," Lena said, squeezing Lexie's hand. "Give her a chance to do this."

Coal refused to be ignored. He kept nuzzling Kara's hand, encouraging her to pet and scratch his jaw as she always did.

"Coal, I can't," Kara said, looking at him. "Please." Kara bit her lip and blinked to hold back the tears that welled up in her eyes. Coal pressed his face against her chest, rolling the wheelchair backward. Kara grabbed his harness with both hands to keep from rolling back toward the window. "Coal, stop it," she said angrily. "Okay, I'll give you a pat once." She gave his long snout a pat, then another, while he remained still, enjoying her touch.

Lena smiled at Lexie, nodding toward Kara.

"I know, Coal. I know," Kara sniffled as she continued to gently stroke his face. "I'm sorry, but I can't ride you. You don't understand, but I just can't. I don't understand it either. But that's how things are." Coal shook his head and stomped his foot nervously, as if he were tired of waiting for Kara to get in the saddle. She pulled on the reins to bring him back within reach. "Lexie will ride you, boy. Maybe you'll want to stay in the big house with the other horses." That remark brought a flood of tears to Kara's eyes. She knew it was best for him, but she hated admitting it to him or to herself. She threw her arms around his head and hugged him, sobbing into his mane.

"Come on, Lexie," Lena said, leading the way out of the barn.

Lexie followed, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"I found her," Lena called out as she walked onto the porch.

Kara quickly pushed Coal away and rubbed her eyes with her hand.

"Lexie, you need to get Coal out of the sun," Kara said, turning her wheelchair toward the door.

"Wait, Kara," Lena said. "You don't need to come inside yet."

"I have things to do," she argued, fumbling to move the wheelchair out of the way so she could open the door.

"No, you don't," Lena retorted. "You wait here," she said, sliding inside and closing and locking the door.

"Hey, I want to come in," Kara called out, shaking the doorknob. "Lena!"

"It looks like she doesn't want you to come in yet," Lexie said, laughing awkwardly. She didn't know what to say to Kara. She felt uncomfortable. Normally, she and Kara could joke about anything, but this Kara was different. This Kara was rude and distant. There was a coldness in her voice and emptiness in her eyes that Lexie didn't recognize.

"You shouldn't have left Coal out in the sun," Kara said without looking at her.

"He's been in the sun before, Kara," Lexie replied.

"I don't care. He doesn't need to be tied up on the porch."

"Why? Because you don't want to see him?"

Kara turned and gave her a heartless look. "What the hell do you know about it?"

"I know you love this horse, and he doesn't understand why you're ignoring him," Lexie replied.

"Sure. Right. Every day, you can bring him to the porch, and I can roll here and pet him for five minutes. Does that make you happy?"

"Is that what you want, Kara?"

"I want him to be taken to Dad. Let someone ride him. I don't care."

"Since when do you not care?" Lena said, opening the door and pushing the wheelchair onto the porch.

"Oh no, you don't. Take this damn thing back inside," Kara grimaced. "You know I can't ride."

"She'll need her legs to hold on," Lexie cautioned carefully.

"I'm not just sitting on Coal, you know," Lena said, maneuvering to the top of the newly constructed ramp and locking the wheels.

"I'm not getting on Coal. So forget it." Kara pushed the wheelchair to the corner of the porch. "Take this back inside."

"Are you afraid of him?" Lena asked, looking at her. "No," Kara scoffed. "Of course not."

"Then why don't you just sit on him?"

"You know why?" Kara replied, resting her hands on her knees. "I can't."

"Who says?" Lena released the straps of the sling and let them dangle.

"My legs, that's who," Kara said, staring wide-eyed at the straps that had lifted her from the wheelchair so many times.

"You helped me get on a horse. You talked me through my fear. Let me help you with yours," Lena said, coming to Kara's side. "You won't fall. I promise you that."

"I can't ride a horse," Kara said, her jaw trembling with fear.

"I'll hold him," Lexie offered reassuringly. "He won't go anywhere." She held the reins and turned Coal toward the ramp.

"We'll help you, honey," Lena said, kneeling beside her. "All you need to do is trust us. Don't be afraid."

"I can't," Kara said, swallowing a lump in her throat.

"When I needed your help, you were there for me. You were the strong and brave woman I leaned on when my dad died. Let me be the one you lean on now."

"Lena, you don't know what you're asking me to do."

"Oh, yes, I do. I love you. And I'm asking you to love me enough to trust me," Lena said, placing her hand on Kara's. There was a kind of trust in Lena's eyes.

"What if I can't?" Kara pleaded.

"Then you'll know you tried."

"But..." she started, her eyes turning to Coal and the saddle on his back.

"Yes," Lena replied with a gentle smile. "I want your butt in that saddle. And so do you." Lena saw something in Kara's face. She didn't say it, but Lena knew it was time. She kissed Kara's cheek, then put the wheelchair in place next to the lift. Kara didn't argue as Lena fastened the slings under her legs and around her back. She carefully lifted Kara from the wheelchair and pushed her slowly down the ramp. Kara held the straps, her eyes wide and her face pale as she was lifted alongside Coal's back. With the skill of a surgeon, Lena positioned her over the saddle. Coal didn't move a muscle as Kara was slowly put in place, one of her lifeless legs hanging on each side of the saddle.

"Unhook the sling, Kara," Lena advised.

"I'm not sure about this. Maybe I'll just stay like this," she held onto the canvas straps tightly.

"I want to move the lift out of the way so Coal isn't hit by it. Just release the hooks. I'll bring it back as soon as you're ready."

"Don't go too far," Kara said, nervously undoing one hook and then the other. When her body settled into the saddle, she grabbed the horn of the saddle with both hands. "Wait," she gasped as her body moved slightly. "I can't sit up straight." She leaned forward and grabbed Coal's neck.

"I've got you," Lexie said, grabbing one of her legs and helping her straighten up. "Sit down, girl. Sit up straight. Straighten your shoulders over the saddle." Lexie looked at her, offering an encouraging smile. "That's it."

Lena moved the lift out of the way, leaving Kara alone on Coal's back.

"Is it different?" Lena asked.

"Yes," Kara replied, swallowing hard as sweat formed on her upper lip. "I think I should get down now."

"How about taking a ride around the yard? Coal will take his time," Lena smiled at her.

"No," Kara immediately retorted. "This is fine. Bring the lift back."

"I'll lead him very slowly," Lexie reassured.

"I don't need to be treated like a child. Get me down."

"You're okay," Lena said, looking at her.

"No, I'm not. Get me down. I'll fall," Kara said, scowling at her. "I can't hold on to keep from slipping to the side, I'll fall. Get me down. Knock me down," she shouted, veins popping in her neck.

"Kara, you're fine," Lena said calmly, touching her leg.

"Lena, I can't do this." Kara hissed, unable to control her anger or her fear.

"Lexie, help me get up," Lena said, reaching for the saddle. She struggled to get her toe in the stirrup, its height above her thigh.

"What are you doing?" Kara frowned.

"Move your hand," Lena said, grabbing on.

Lexie gave Lena a boost, pushing her behind Kara. She swung her leg over Coal's rump and hooked it behind Kara, crossing her arms around her.

"Oh wow. This is the tallest horse I've ever seen," Lena gasped as she secured her legs around his wide waist. She snuggled against Kara, their bodies molded together. Lena swallowed hard and refused to look down.

"I've got you now. You can't fall," Lena gave a squeeze to Kara. "Give Kara the reins, Lexie. Let's take a ride."

"Here you go, girl," Lexie said proudly, holding them out to her.

"No, wait," Kara argued, but her hand took the reins.

"Please, Kara. Go slowly. I'm not used to tall horses," Lena chuckled nervously.

"I don't know about this," Kara said.

"I do," Lena whispered.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Lena?" Kara asked.

"There's nothing I want more," Lena replied, holding Kara tightly, her legs locked around Coal's broad waist.

Kara adjusted the reins in her hand and gave a small whistle. Coal responded with a slow but steady pace around the yard, his surprisingly smooth steps. Kara fought the urge to grab the saddle horn. Instead, she sat proudly in the saddle, guiding him with a gentle pressure on his neck. They took

several circles around the yard before Kara relaxed into Lena's arms. Lena could feel her body melting into the rhythmic sway of Coal's walk.

"Are you comfortable?" Lena asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Are you?"

"I'm fine. And so are you," Lena added, kissing Kara's neck. "I'm so proud of you."

"I thought I'd never be able to do this again," Kara said, with a lump in her throat.

"Oh, darling, I know. You love it too much not to."

"Thank you," Kara said, gently squeezing Lena's leg.

"For what?" Lena asked innocently.

"Satin sheets," Kara replied softly. She turned her head to Lena's lips and leaned in for them. "And for being here with me."

"I'm not going anywhere, honey," Lena said tenderly.

Kara whistled, and Coal moved to a slow trot. She guided him through the open gate beyond the paddock. Lena held Kara tightly, both to reassure herself and to protect her. They floated across the pasture in an easy canter, the Texas wind in their hair. Lena couldn't see the tears rolling down Kara's face, tears compressed by her wide smile.

"Don't worry, Lena. I'll never let you fall," Kara said.

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